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MARY, RISING FROM HER SEAT, LOOKED ADMIRINGLY AROUND.

Two Young Girls; or, The Bride of an Earl.

BY ALICE FLEMING.

CHAPTER I. COUNTRY GIRLS.

Two young girls, walking leisurely with that air of graceful repose so consonant with youth and innocence, made their way up a narrow path that rose from the bosom of a little village, whose handful of cottages straggled down toward the beach, to a rocky eminence, whence a charming view seaward was gained by the ascent.

It was in the middle of September; but the summer had been wet and unseasonable, and Nature, as if to atone for past unkindness, was now all smiles and sunshine. The greensward was distinguished by the elasticity so pleasant to the tread at an earlier period; the leaves on the trees, invigorated by copious showers, rustled merrily in the gentle breeze, joyous, as it were, in the consciousness that their lease of life would be extended long beyond the usual period of their decay; while the azure of the sky above, the transparent green of the white-crested waves that threw themselves with playful abandon on the beach, and the whiteness of the cliffs, formed a glorious contrast.

The young girls, whose footsteps we will follow, looked thoughtful—one of them sad.

We shall presently see with what excuse they were at all out of har-

mony with the joyousness of the surrounding scene.

They were sisters; but though relatives would possibly have detected what is called a "family likeness" between them, a stranger would have noticed none.

To introduce them with due exactitude to the reader, we must here observe that their names are Millicent and Mary Farrell, and that they reside, with their widowed mother (their father, a wealthy commoner, having died nearly a year since), at Aughton Lodge, an estate near Verdon Park, the residence of Lord Verdon, a young nobleman who had only quite recently succeeded to the title, his father, the late Earl, dying two months after his neighbor, Mr. Farrell, between whom and himself, notwithstanding the difference in their worldly position, there had existed for many years past a firm friendship.

In politics the Verdons had from time immemorial been Liberal to the backbone, and their friendships had always been as sincere as their political convictions.

Millicent, two-and-twenty, and the elder of the two by a year, was a tall, slender, rather sallow-complexioned girl, with jet-black hair, and eyes of the darkest brown. She was not positively pretty, yet her expression was pleasing and attractive.

There was no strength of character to be discerned therein, still, despite the negative quality of her charms, whether mental or physical, Millicent Farrell was a girl likely to gain many admirers.

She boasted a remarkably good figure, dressed in excellent taste, and, though she knew little, had the good sense to talk less—indeed, she exercised so successfully a sound discretion in concealing her deficiencies, that few among her acquaintances were aware of them; and there was sufficient grace in her carriage to cover a multitude of conversational sins.

Mary Farrell was a girl of an entirely different stamp. As already intimated, there was no personal resemblance between her and her sister; still less did they resemble each other mentally.

Personally, Mary Farrell was the brightest specimen of an English country beauty you would wish to look upon. Her hair was of the purest shade of light brown; her eyes, teeming with expression, were hazel, and their glance was full of confidence, bright intelligence, and honest friendship; her complexion, as a country girl's should, always boasted the rose's bloom; and the vermilion lips, when in repose, charmed by the mingled gentleness and firmness they expressed; while her profile was gracefully shaped and rounded.

In almost every respect she presented a decided contrast to her sister, but in none more than in the force and decision of character so distinctly traceable in her every look and movement.

Nevertheless, despite much that was opposite in their dispositions, Millicent and Mary Farrell were sincerely attached to one another, and got on remarkably well together.

Whenever they found they could not agree, they always agreed to differ—an excellent course for young ladies to pursue.

On this fine September morning they have much to talk about, for they are on the point of leaving the pleasant surroundings amid which we find them, their mother having determined to quit the country and reside in London.

Let us listen to the conversation, initiated by Mary Farrell, as, having reached the summit of the cliff, the girls seat themselves on a little rustic bench and look out over the sea, that so blue, calm, and sparkling, lies at their feet.

"This is glorious," exclaimed Mary, enthusiastically. "How sorry I shall be to leave the dear old place—to abandon every old association. Depend upon it, Millicent, we shall experience many regrets, find ourselves saddened by many thoughts of the past."

"I cannot agree with you, Mary, and in this

case shall not pretend to do so," said Miss Farrell, speaking slowly and languidly, as she usually chose to do. "Mamma has excellent reasons for the step she is about to take, and in those reasons—"

"You are specially interested," interposed Mary, quietly, yet with the faintest smile.

"What do you mean, Mary?" rejoined Millicent, nervously, her pale face reddening a little.

"Only that it is mainly on your account, Millicent, that mamma is—is acting as she is."

"Perhaps, dear sister, we should not agree as to what is really and mainly the cause of—of—"

"Mamma's move?" suggested Mary, looking as if she were inclined to become mischievous, conversationally.

"Yes, mamma's move, if you like; but don't get satirical. I was only going to say we had better fall back upon our good old agreement, and not argue."

"Very well," laughed Mary.

"As for mamma, you know she never did like the country; don't you remember the words of that 'society' poet of a past generation, whom she is so fond of quoting—"

"A house is much more to my taste than a tree, And of groves—oh, a good grove of chimneys for me."

Mary looked up at her sister rather admiringly.

Millicent certainly had a wonderful facility for saying the right thing in the right place, and that, too, with emphasis, which was surprising, considering her somewhat limited mental capacity. She was shrewd, though exceedingly superficial; had a knack for picking up odd sayings, ideas, and opinions, and quoting them with the air of a person who has read a little, which, combined with the exercise of a judicious reticence at the right moment, stood her in very good stead.

"I never remember hearing mamma repeat the lines," said Mary, with a smile; "but I think your author also gave the preference to the 'sweet shady side of Pall Mall.'"

"Delightful!" ejaculated Millicent.

"But," continued her sister, "how about the 'sweet shady side of Camden Town' where mamma has taken a house? Will that be equally to your taste?"

"Mary, don't tease; you are aware that I know as little of London as you do yourself; but that, unlike yourself, I am dying to taste its pleasures."

Mary, rising from her seat, looked admiringly around, on the sea one side, the green fields and the chalky roads on the other, and the pretty houses scattered here and there in picturesque clusters in and about the sheltered little valley wherein the "town" was built, and said, "I should have thought even you, Millicent, would have felt the influence of early recollections."

"Lord Verdon is not always in the country; he will be in London often, especially in the season," said Miss Farrell, speaking rather inwardly, and in a musing tone.

Mary glanced swiftly at her sister. Why should she connect Lord Verdon with her early recollection—her future life? On reflection, she remembered having heard from her mother that Millicent, when quite a child, was often patted affectionately on the head by the late Earl, invited to Verdon Hall, made much of by the Countess, and that Vance (the present Earl) used to call Millicent his little sweetheart, and take many a long ramble with her over the home park; also, that within the last few months, since the death of their father, her mother had been given to indulging in much speculation concerning the young Earl of Verdon, and that Millicent's cheeks had been wont to flush rather significantly whenever she heard his name mentioned.

Could it be possible, she asked herself, that her mother entertained the notion that Millicent would ever stand any real chance of becoming the wife of the Earl of Verdon?

"I am afraid, Millicent," she said, after a pause, "that when we are settled in London

we shall find it quite out of the question to think of keeping up any sort of intimacy with Lord Verdon. Here, in the country, it has been different. Our father was at one time enabled to do the late Earl a service—an important service, I believe. The Earl's affairs became involved, and it was hardly a secret that our father helped him with a large loan. The Earl never forgot the services rendered him, hence the friendly way in which his son and the Countess regard us; and that they would do almost anything to help us if we needed aid I readily believe; but we shall be only placing ourselves in a false position if we even allow ourselves to fancy that the Verdons care as much for us as they did for papa. Now, papa was a favorite—a great favorite with the late Earl long before the affair of the loan, solely because their political views were the same."

"Apropos of what, my dear Mary, is this most elaborate oration—or plain statement of facts, my practical-minded sister may prefer calling it? I don't want to eat Vance, Earl of Verdon," broke in Miss Farrell.

"No; but mamma wants you to marry him," was Mary's reply, in a quiet undertone.

Millicent's face flushed, her breath came quick. She knew that there was some truth in her sister's words; that her mother had thrown out many hints whose purport was unmistakable. For a moment, her mother's ambitious project, as indicated by her sister, became a bright possibility in her mind, and a fairy vision rose before her eyes.

For a moment only, and then it was gone, and she sighed, and turning to her sister, said, "Dear Mary, when I and Lord Verdon were boy and girl we were sweethearts in miniature. We were children then, and talked of love as children do. I should be a child, worse than a child, were I to think now of what you say mamma wishes."

"Your words relieve me, dear Millicent; but you speak for yourself only; and mamma, I am convinced, has views and plans in the execution of which she is determined not to be thwarted, and will do all she can to persuade you to assist in their furtherance."

"Rest assured I shall be swayed by no unworthy aspirations," replied Miss Farrell. "But see, 'a gentle knight comes nimbly o'er the plain.' If he can run the gantlet of our eyes and remain unscathed, he is well armed."

The "gentle knight" was a pedestrian, in the garb of a tourist, who was walking sturdily across the fields in the direction of our country girls, with the view of descending the narrow path that led to the embryo town below.

On nearer approach, he proved on inspection to be a tall, well-built young fellow; rough, but ready; awkward, yet well-looking. His features were good, but his air was a trifle queer, and he grew self-conscious as he passed Millicent and her sister.

Many a true word is said to be uttered in jest. Miss Farrell had the satisfaction of conquering this good-humored, powerfully-built excursionist by a glance.

His footsteps descended on the grass like a sledge-hammer, in a succession of heavy thuds, rapid and uncompromising; but directly he caught sight of Millicent and looked into her face in passing, as a stranger might, so strong was the impression produced that it evidently required all the self-possession he could command to walk on his way. His legs almost trembled under him, and he seemed in danger of a momentary collapse; but another moment, and he was out of sight.

"Poor fellow!" whispered Mary. "Badly hurt, I'm sure. You struck him, Millicent, as a wave strikes a yacht when she's tacking and trembles all over."

"Now, if he were only an earl," said Miss Farrell, "what a deal of trouble might be saved! I could go home and say, 'Mamma, dear, *Veni, vidi, vici*—I came, saw and conquered—an earl.' Well, I wonder *what* he is; looks like a Londoner, don't you think so, Mary?"

"A Londoner, decidedly."

"Then," continued Millicent, in the same merry, jesting vein, "that's one point in his favor, at least; for mamma, who will have it that everything that comes from town is best, has promised us a brace of London lovers."

With a merry laugh, the girls resumed their walk, turning inland in the direction of their home.

CHAPTER II.

AN UGLY INTRUDER.

THE young man—Peter Puddefoot, by name—just referred to, on getting clear of the ladies, walked firmly and briskly along—as do too many—on the downward path, and soon found himself in the midst of the few houses and shops that were nestled together at the foot of the cliff.

Turning up a narrow lane, he came to some half-dozen cottages, built of wood, embosomed in the cliff, with charming little front gardens, bordered with shells, and glowing with the varied profusion of color of simple but brilliant-hued flowers.

Into one of these Mr. Peter Puddefoot walked; up the short garden path, through the open door, which admitted him into an unpretending but neatly furnished room.

There was an old-fashioned mahogany chest of drawers, with large brass handles, a good-sized table, covered with a smart cloth, some plain Windsor chairs, and a straight-backed arm-chair, in which was seated an aged dame, nodding in a comfortable semi-somnolent condition. A cat was stretched at full length in front of the grate, enjoying the savory odor that emanated from a large saucepan on the fire; but, cat-like, on the sound of footsteps, it retreated with a sudden spring to the sill of the small, diamond-paned window, looking out on a glare of white chalk and a three-cornered yard.

"Well, grandmother, here I am again, true to dinner-time; and bless your dear old soul for making me as comfortable as you have done for a week past. Why, granny, you've saved me two-thirds of a five-pound note, at least; and I can't help thinking sometimes that it's downright selfish and mean of me to put you to the trouble and expense I must have caused."

"Your dinner's ready, Peter," said the old woman, rousing herself gradually, an affectionate kiss from her grandson having signified his return. "And as for 'trouble' and 'expense,' you know Jane Pearce is a good girl, and comes in and does everything as regular as if she was my own servant; while for money, I've got more than the like of me, at my time of life, will ever want. And talking of that, Peter, I've more coin in that chest of drawers than I care to keep there; so when you go back home, I think I shall get you to take it—leastways, the best part of it—to your father, to invest it safe for me."

"The best thing you can do, granny, is to act as the gov'nor wants you to—come up to London, and invest *yourself* in our crib at Camberwell. Lor' bless you, you don't know how he and the mother talk about it!"

The old dame's eyes glistened.

"You see, Peter," she said, "I never was much given to change, and the older I grow, the better I seem to like the old place where I was born and reared. But I have no desire to die away from you all; and you may tell your father that in a year or two's time, if I am spared, I'll do as he wishes."

"As we all wish," interrupted her grandson, earnestly.

"Heaven has bestowed upon me no greater blessing than the knowledge that I live in the affections of my children, and in that knowledge, when my time comes, I shall die happy!" said the good dame.

She then rose, and laying the table-cloth, soon put her grandson's dinner before him; which done, she had the satisfaction of seeing him discuss the savory stew he sat down to with an eager appetite.

Peter Puddefoot was a clerk in the city of London, a quiet specimen of the commercial class to which he belonged, returning regularly every evening after business to his home at Camberwell, where he never missed the hearty welcome of his fond parents. He was an only son, and they were proudly fond of him.

Peter sincerely reciprocated his parents' love; was a good son in every respect; was reckoned by those who knew him pleasant, if not actually good-looking; he had a horror of "fast" life; and was, indeed, about as steady a going young fellow as any to be met with within sound of Bow Bells.

These were his best points; he had his weaknesses. He was rather vain—as some shy young fellows are; read poetry until he became, in theory, at all events, quite a ladies' man; was always looking out for a "princess in disguise;" peered admiringly, but never rudely, in the faces of all the girls—at least, all who were not destitute of personal attractions—whom he passed on his way to and from the city; and when we add that he was a great pedestrian, a great student of maps, railway guides, handbooks; that he was, and loved to be considered, an authority on omnibus fares, routes, distances, and, in short, everything relating to locomotion generally, from a Pullman's down to a low-backed car, we shall have said sufficient to indicate the unassuming nature of his tastes and habits.

His annual holiday of three weeks over, he would diligently set to work, mentally, to prepare his outing for the next year, and in this respect his simplicity of character was admirable. A thoroughbred Londoner, he loved and hated London by turns; like most cockneys, railing against it himself when it suited his humor, but allowing no one else to do so. He was content to work hard, to live a quiet life with his father and mother, to be a dutiful son to them, to go on year after year in the same groove, cherishing, in his heart of hearts, one ambition only—an ardent longing to marry some day a fair being who would love him perfectly as a wife, and yet be a little above him in point of birth, breeding, and education. Other men might regard women as their inferiors, but a certain innate chivalry of disposition would cause him to look rather for a woman whom he could honestly regard as his superior than one whom he would be obliged, with equal honesty, to consider at all beneath him.

Peter's parents were a homely couple, who had plodded perseveringly through life, and on retiring from business found themselves in easy circumstances.

Old Mrs. Puddefoot's husband, a boatman, had been dead some twenty-three years, and, as we have seen, she hopes eventually to end her days beneath her son's roof in London.

His dinner finished, Mr. Puddefoot lit his pipe, and, while his grandmother nodded over a newspaper, indulged in a pleasant reverie, culminating in the conviction that the young lady whom he had passed a few short hours since on the cliff was the very incarnation of the ideal heroine who had long existed in his mind for whom he would give a fortune, were he ever possessed of one, could be in return win her for his wife. It was a pure case of "love at first sight;" or, rather, beholding Millicent Farrell, he had seen at a glance the bodily realization of the shadowy creation his imagination had before conjured up—the epitome of all those lovable graces and attributes, whose union was indispensable for the formation of his standard of beauty.

"The girl I could love, work, slave for to the end of my days," he said to himself, or rather quite loud enough to be heard by his grandmother.

"Eh, what's that?—'love!' 'slave for?'" exclaimed the old woman, rubbing her eyes. "Why, Peter, boy! am I to believe my senses, or have you lost yours?"

"Lost mine! that's it, granny," cried Mr. Puddefoot, doing his utmost to get rid of the blush of confusion the betrayal of his secret

had brought to his cheeks. "Mad I must be to think that *she* could ever bring herself to look at *me*," he added, with something like a groan.

Old Mrs. Puddefoot, who, though in her seventy-first year, was still sharp-sighted and sympathetic where the tender passion was concerned, tried to draw her grandson out, and asked him for a minute description of the general appearance of the young ladies he had met on the cliff.

"What's it matter how they looked?" he responded, dolefully. "I have lived to love, and, in the same breath, to despair!" he added, in a slightly melodramatic tone.

Mr. Puddefoot was a moderate, yet, in his way, an enthusiastic play-goer.

The old lady made further efforts to enable her to determine in her own mind who the girls were, for she believed she knew every man, woman and child in the place, but without success. Nevertheless, she made a random, but, as it happened, correct guess.

"They might be Mrs. Farrell's daughters," she mused; and, if so, that would fit in with my dream of last night," she reflected.

"I only know that one of them is an angel, and consequently beyond my reach," replied Peter, moodily.

No more was said, but Mrs. Puddefoot was exceedingly thoughtful till bed-time.

On retiring to rest, Peter could not resist the temptation to cast more than one furtive glance at his features in the looking-glass. He was not in a mood to depreciate such personal attractions as he could fairly boast of, but the result of his inspection was not altogether satisfactory. By the time he had covered his head over with the bed-clothes he had sunk very low in his own estimation. The shade of his hair, a very warm auburn, seemed more hateful to him than ever; his eyes he mentally pronounced inexpressive; his nose and lips coarse.

And yet Mr. Puddefoot was not a bad-looking fellow in his way; for though his features, taken singly, were not of the handsomest, their combined effect was, on the whole, prepossessing; and his countenance had one great charm—an honest, open English look that went straight to the heart.

It must have been about one in the morning that Peter Puddefoot woke up suddenly, and got quietly but quickly out of bed, under the impression that he heard the sound of footsteps on the landing outside. He opened his door gently, and was just in time to detect the intrusion of a man's body into his grandmother's chamber. The intruder, having opened the door, remained in a stationary attitude, his body bent forward, his eyes peering into the apartment.

Peter, getting out on the landing as noiselessly as possible, walked close up behind him, and then, with a sudden spring, fastened upon the man's neck with a vigor which secured the immediate success of his attack.

Exerting all his strength he succeeded in dragging him down the narrow staircase out into the front garden. The noise of the scuffle awoke Mrs. Puddefoot from her slumbers. Being blessed with strong nerves, she struck a light, and made her way cautiously down the stairs.

In the meantime, her grandson had given a good account of the disturber of their peace, whom he succeeded in forcing into the street without for an instant letting go his hold.

Though the distance was short, the encounter had almost overtaxed his strength, his opponent being strongly built, and, although stout, active.

Peter, therefore, cast a rapid glance up and down the narrow thoroughfare, and shouted for assistance.

None was forthcoming. Not a light was to be seen; all was perfectly quiet.

For a few seconds both remained silent, panting with exertion, when, making a sudden dash, Puddefoot's antagonist essayed to break from his grasp, and succeeded.

To make good his escape was now a comparatively easy task; for, though Peter did his best to recapture him, the fellow managed to elude him, and finally ran off, delivering himself as he did so of a malediction, which, being in a, to Peter, unknown tongue, was lost upon its object.

Peter hastened back to his grandmother's cottage, and found his aged relative standing in the parlor, a light in her hand, as if awaiting his return.

The old woman was not so agitated as, under the circumstances, might have been expected, and said to her grandson, in a mysterious undertone, "Has he escaped?"

"Eh—escaped? Yes; worse luck, he has," replied Peter, amazed at the rapidity with which his grandmother had recovered her equanimity. "I had a desperate tussle with the rascal, though!" he added, a little self-complacently.

"You're as brave as a lion, Peter; but for you I might have been—"

"Killed," suggested her grandson.

"Not exactly," returned Mrs. Puddefoot, thoughtfully. "I don't think he meant that."

"Well, if it wasn't that, it was robbery; and the lesser crime has led to the perpetration of the greater before now," replied Peter, truth to say, a little nettled at, as he considered it, the cool way in which his relative was pursuing in her mind some train of thought unknown to him, and yet, as he believed, connected with what had just occurred.

"My dear Peter," she said, "if you wouldn't mind lighting a fire, I think I should like a cup of tea. Going to bed again is out of the question. Let's have an early breakfast."

She smiled—positively smiled—though grimly, thought Peter, as he proceeded to carry out her suggestion.

"I want to ask you, granny, if you think robbery wasn't the errand of that ruffian, what, in your opinion, was it?" said Mr. Puddefoot, as he sat down opposite his grandmother.

"To find out whether I was alive or dead," was the answer.

"Th—then you fancy you—that is, that the fellow knows you?" said Peter, opening his eyes wide with astonishment.

"Listen to me, Peter," responded the old dame, "and you will then understand better why it is I'm not altogether so surprised and upset as would be natural for an old woman like me to be when a strange man comes and prowls about her place at one in the morning. Do you believe in dreams?"

"I can't exactly say that I do," he answered.

"Then, if you don't, I do!" said the old woman, rather tartly. "But to begin at the beginning. It is twenty years ago, come to-morrow, that I had a room to let—here, in this very cottage—when, one morning, there comes a Frenchman—"

"A Frenchman—that fellow I was tussling with just now was a Frenchman, I'll swear, by his phiz and lingo!" interrupted Peter, excitedly.

"I know he was, my dear; but listen patiently, please, or you'll throw me out altogether. Well, as I was sayin', I had a room to let, when, one day, a Frenchman came and took it, not for himself, but for a young gal—she was English—to whom I took a sort of sudden fancy, as one does, sometimes, you know. She had a baby, quite young, and I suppose that helped to make me take her in, or else the affair looked suspicious. He said she was his daughter. Well, I had my own idea about the rights of the case, though I said nothing. So she came. He went away, and didn't return for a month, during which time she got rather drooping, but always seemed fond of the child, though as it struck me, not quite so fond of it as if she was really its mother, though I had been told that she was its real mother; and the little thing—it was a girl—didn't resemble her or the man a bit; and, when he did return, it was to pay up the rent, and take 'em both away, all in a hurry."

"And you never heard?" interposed Peter, greatly interested.

"Have patience, and I'll tell you what happened," continued Mrs. Puddefoot. "I never saw her again *alive*; but, a week later, the body of a young woman was washed ashore on the beach here."

"It was her body?"

"It was."

"And the child?"

"Was never heard of. The whole affair was a mystery, a deep mystery, covering some great crime. Nobody could fathom it. I said all I knew, which was next to nothing, and there it ended."

"And the man?" interrogated her grandson.

"Well, I have often seen him in my dreams; and you—you, Peter, have seen him here in the flesh, *this night*!"

Peter Puddefoot, as has been seen, was no coward, yet he felt his flesh begin to creep.

He rose from his chair and walked toward the door for a mouthful of fresh air. In doing so, his foot came in contact with some substance which, having taken the light from the table, he stooped to pick up. It proved to be a well-worn pocket-book.

"Dropped by that black-muzzled Frenchman, no doubt!" he exclaimed.

Mrs. Puddefoot snatched the book from his hand, and, unfastening it, examined its contents. They were few—only half a dozen letters in French, and a photograph. The latter the old dame inspected.

"It's the same! I knew I was right!—it's his own likeness!" she cried, triumphantly.

The features were those of a stout, not bad-looking, but commonplace individual.

"Well, granny, I dare say you are right, if you say so; but I wish the original hadn't given me the slip!" said Peter.

"Strange that at that very time twenty years ago there should have been so much talk about a quarrel between Mr. Farrell and his wife!" said Mrs. Puddefoot, musingly.

"If you think all's safe, I should like to get forty winks," said Peter, yawning.

Taking the hint, Mrs. Puddefoot set her grandson the example by dozing—or pretending to doze—in her chair; and Peter soon fell into a heavy sleep.

When he awoke it was broad daylight, and the sun was streaming into the room.

"I sha'n't like leaving you here after what has happened," he said, later in the day.

"You must not live alone in this place any longer, grandmother."

"I will not make any change at present!" was the resolute reply. "I shall be all right with a few extra safeguards—bolts and chains."

With which her grandson, knowing the obstinacy of her character, was obliged to be contented.

Three days later, Mr. Peter Puddefoot returned to London.

Taking a farewell walk with his grandmother in the morning, they were passed by Millicent Farrell and her sister.

"Is that the gal you've taken a fancy to?" asked the dame, indicating Millicent as she spoke.

"Taken a fancy to? Weak words to express *my* feelings!" thought Peter, who whispered, in reply, "It is."

"Humph! then let me tell you, grandson, that that gal's mother has set her heart on the Earl of Verdon for the husband of her eldest daughter. So, you see, you will have a rival, Peter."

Her grandson sighed disconsolately.

"But, if it's any consolation to you, in my humble opinion she's quite as likely to become Mrs. Peter Puddefoot as the Countess of Verdon," she continued.

"You're a poor Job's comforter, and I'm a big fool, granny! But, all the same, that young lady's the only girl I'll ever marry—she or nobody!" rejoined Peter, doggedly.

CHAPTER III.

THE WIDOW'S PLANS.

MRS. FARRELL'S house was known as Aughton Lodge, and was adjacent to Verdon Park; so near, indeed, that the widow was enabled to refer pointedly when entertaining company to the "nice neighbors" she had, not requiring any great amount of pressing to refer to them more definitely as the Earl of Verdon and his family, or, when it suited her purpose to be more familiar, as "the Verdens."

Mrs. Farrell was a vain woman—vain of her personal attractions especially, and then of "her position," which she was always restlessly "feeding," just as some nervous people are perpetually piling coal on a fire, as if they feared the possibility of its going out suddenly, as a street lamp does sometimes in a gale of wind.

When a person is proud, and yet has very little to be proud of, people are prone to make ill-natured remarks; and Mrs. Farrell's neighbors were in the habit of asking one another, with the air of putting a plain question that demanded a prompt and explicit answer, what that good lady had to "brag" about, and of remarking that all she possessed she had to thank her husband for, likewise indulging in those "free" remarks about her antecedents, which, from the facility with which they are exchanged, prove how surprisingly intimate nine persons out of ten are with such of their friends' ancestors as happen to have been "nobodies," and what a pleasant task it is to dig them up, and rehabilitate them in their insignificance.

There was, however, a good deal of truth in what was said about Mrs. Farrell, and self-assertion was necessary to keep her light from sudden extinction. Her husband had married her a penniless woman, under the impression that he had found at last a love that would sympathize with certain fixed habits which he had formed—the habits rather of a bachelor than a Benedict. It was really more friendship than love that he wanted; but he knew almost as little of one as of the other, for he had been engaged all his life in the successful pursuit of wealth, and had so little confidence in his knowledge of the world (*his "world"* had never extended beyond the confines of Capel Court), that when he determined, late in life, to take unto himself a wife, he consulted his lawyer on the point, and was guided by his advice, as if the affair had been a mortgage or an ordinary investment.

The result was not all that he could have wished, for his wife proved herself to be domineering and intractable.

When he went to reside in the country she ridiculed what she was pleased to sneer at as his bucolic tastes. Nevertheless, Mr. Farrell carried his point. The spirit of compromise was alien to his nature. He would do as he liked, and was willing to concede to others the same right. He hated London life as much as his wife enjoyed it; so, buying house and land judiciously, he soon became in the country a respected and substantial man.

His acquaintance with, and, subsequently, the friendship that existed between himself and the Earl of Verdon was a source of honest pride to the self-made man.

His opinions were always in sincere agreement with the Liberal lord; his purse was at one time at his lordship's service, and proved of great benefit to him; and the Earl of Verdon liked the wealthy commoner, for, being a shrewd man of the world, he saw Farrell's good qualities—saw, too, that his faults were mainly those inseparable from his early surroundings.

On the death of her husband Mrs. Farrell found that, under his will, she had no power to act. Everything was arranged with a view to the future interests of the children, Millicent and Mary, she, personally, being almost ignored. But she knew the reason only too well, and the saffron hue of guilt crept over the features of Mrs. Farrell as she thought

of a certain episode in her career that occurred a score or so of years ago—a scandal at the recollection of which she set her teeth hard, as if she would bite it out of her memory.

There was one thing she could and would do; if she could not touch much of her husband's money, she would thwart his most cherished wishes, act in every way in opposition to what she knew would be his desire had he been alive.

Her first step in this direction was to make the necessary arrangements for leaving the country. This was soon done. At the same time she had no intention of losing sight of the young Earl of Verdon. He would be in London, she reflected, during the season at least, and she thought that it ought to be an easy task—always supposing that she was right in her conjecture that the youthful lord was really attracted by Millicent's charms—to secure him for a son-in-law.

As a boy, he had been decidedly in love with Millicent; and maneuvering mothers, like drowning men, are given to clutching at straws.

Besides, the Verdon's were, as they always had been, thoroughly, consistently Liberal. They thought no better of themselves because of the accidental circumstance of their rank; had none of the conventional prejudices of their class; and if ever a nobleman did marry beneath him, she argued, none more likely than a Verdon.

Nor did the wily widow fail to take into consideration her husband's intimacy with the late Earl, with the view of utilizing it in furtherance of her ambitious project.

So Mrs. Farrell went on planning and scheming, until she found herself within three days of the date fixed for her removal to London, where she fondly hoped, their lives would be, like the hoop of Hood's schoolboy, "an eternal round of pleasure."

She was deep in thought when, chancing to look out of the window, she saw in the distance the splendid pair of grays which always graced the Earl of Verdon's carriage—an equipage as well known to the widow as a constant and minute study of it could make it familiar—being driven in the direction of Aughton Lodge.

Great was her surprise when it stopped at the gate, and it became evident that she was about to be honored by a call.

Mrs. Farrell put on her best manner as she saw the Countess of Verdon walk, with the charming grace and air of high breeding of which she always envied her ladyship the possession whenever she saw her, up the gravel path to the entrance; and when the servant announced the visitor, moved forward, hot, flustered, and apologetic for the shortcomings of herself and her household—for, like most commonplace persons, she was persuaded that in the opinion of her superiors the slightest deviation from a rigid observance of the canons of etiquette was a heinous sin.

The Countess of Verdon soon put her hostess at ease.

Always frank and winning in her demeanor, she united the most perfect tact with her engaging qualities.

"I have come, my dear Mrs. Farrell, to ask a favor—a great favor of you," she said, looking the picture of affability, and casting an appreciative glance round the really well-furnished apartment—the late Mr. Farrell had possessed excellent taste—in which the widow received her.

"I should be happy indeed could I think it possible that I might be of the smallest service to the Countess of Verdon," replied Mrs. Farrell, nervously, and repeating her words to herself, as soon as uttered, to determine, to her satisfaction, that they were in tolerably "good form."

"To plunge at once into the matter in question," continued Lady Verdon, "I have come to ask you to allow one of your daughters to stay at—at our place for a period, and to play a very important part in our household."

The Countess of Verdon, seated by the side of Mrs. Farrell on a couch, looked the perfection of refinement, her tall, slender figure and delicately formed features contrasting as strongly with the coarse attributes of her hostess as did the ease of her conversation with the widow's labored utterances.

The mother, full of surprise and conjecture, said, in answer to her visitor's last remark, "My daughters should and will be as much flattered as myself by your ladyship's condescension."

"I desire to imply no condescension," said Lady Verdon, quietly.

"You—you are very good, and embolden me to remind your ladyship that your son—that is, Lord Verdon, was at one time—that is," (Mrs. Farrell became flushed and uneasy)—"The little incident is hardly worth mentioning—very, very fond of my child."

The speaker spoke her closing words with a sentimental drawl.

"The little Millicent? Ah, I do remember he used to call her his little sweetheart? That was when he had a great many little sweethearts, I am afraid; but as his mother, I feel pleasure in being reminded that even when a boy of fourteen, or younger, I think, he, in one instance, at least, displayed unquestionable taste."

"Millicent is my eldest daughter, as your ladyship knows."

The Countess's words had fallen very soothingly on the widow's troubled spirit.

"And that reminds me that I should explain that it is not in reference to your eldest daughter I have come to you this morning; it is your dear child Mary, who has promised, subject to your permission, to help us in a serious difficulty in which we find ourselves placed," continued Lady Verdon.

Mrs. Farrell was all sympathetic attention.

"My niece, Miss Wentworth, whom I brought from her home in Italy with me a few weeks ago, is ill—very ill, I grieve to say, suffering from a low fever, which her medical attendant says requires something in addition to his professional skill to insure her speedy restoration to health, and that is good nursing. Now, the nurse whose services we relied on securing has disappointed us. Time is precious, and more time than can be spared would be needed to find a competent substitute; but yesterday I saw your child, and she had a kind wish in her heart, a noble offer on her lips."

"Mary! Your ladyship never met her, I think, in society?"

"In society—no. You will pardon the remark, but has not your second daughter been kept a little too much in the background? I met her not in society, but where it gave me far greater pleasure to meet her, where it did her far more credit to be seen—in the home of a poor cottager, a worthy creature known as Dame Puddefoot who lives alone in the village, very foolishly as it seems, for she has friends in London, I know, who would be glad to have her with them—her son and his family. Mrs. Puddefoot, out walking—though an old woman, she is unusually hale and active—was seized with an attack of giddiness, and fell to the ground, more from a false step consequent on her indisposition than from the indisposition itself, it seems. Your dear child, happening to be close to her at the moment, helped her to recover herself, assisted her to her little cottage, tending the old lady in the kindest, most thoughtful manner. There I accidentally found her."

"Your ladyship! What condescension!" murmured Mrs. Farrell, softly.

"Pardon me, dear Mrs. Farrell, but I do so object to that word. I make little visits of that kind occasionally. Dame Puddefoot, however, is an independent old lady, and by no means destitute; still she lives alone, and is grateful for a little attention. Chatting with her and your daughter, I mentioned the illness of my niece, and it was then that Mary, on hearing of the difficulty in which we are placed at home—" "Why doesn't she say 'Verdon

Park?" marveled Mrs. Farrell, mentally)—"volunteered her services as nurse."

"I wish it had been Millicent," thought Mrs. Farrell, as she bent her head approvingly. "The right thing to do," she reflected; for her plans in reference to her eldest daughter's future might be indirectly forwarded by Mary, even, whom she contemptuously regarded as the Cinderella of her family.

"I must own that I was surprised—agreeably surprised," continued the Countess of Verdon. "So few girls would have had the courage to propose such a thing, even if possessed of the necessary spirit of self-sacrifice."

"My daughters have, I trust, been well trained," said Mrs. Farrell. "At least, I have always done my best," she added, remembering her husband, and looking piously upward.

"The goodness of your child Mary is, I am assured, innate," said Lady Verdon.

"The dispositions of both Millicent and her sister are all that the most anxious parents could desire," replied Mrs. Farrell, with well-affected pride.

"My son long ago found out Millicent's good qualities, and I have a presentiment that I shall be equally fortunate in my experience of Mary," said Lady Verdon, lightly. "Your permission, dear Mrs. Farrell—"

"Is freely given. I feel honored by the request you have made," rejoined the widow, really very well and spontaneously. "Mary shall come at once, your ladyship may depend. She is out just now, but directly she returns shall be informed of your ladyship's cond—wishes, and be with you to-night."

"How shall we repay you for your goodness? That must be determined in the future; but rest assured of my gratitude and friendship," said Lady Verdon, as she took leave of Mrs. Farrell.

On taking her seat in her carriage, the Countess of Verdon threw herself back wearily.

"Heaven forgive me! Never until this day have I ever felt conscious of playing the hypocrite in the least degree for a single moment!" she said to herself. "Such a daughter—such a mother!"

CHAPTER IV.

ALPHONSE BAUDOUIN.

MRS. FARRELL remained for some moments in deep thought after the departure of the Countess of Verdon, and then, throwing a light shawl carelessly over her shoulders, passed through the French window into the garden to seek the solitude of a secluded corner where an ornamental summer retreat had been built. It was embosomed in a wealth of foliage, mainly consisting of substantial evergreens of various kinds, enlivened by flowers; a plentiful show of ferns and two graceful magnolias completing the effect of the charmingly sequestered nook. Adjacent was a paddock, almost entirely hidden from view by the thickly grouped trees and shrubs.

The widow, seating herself in her favorite retreat, became once more absorbed in thought—indeed, it was to enjoy an uninterrupted reverie that she had sought the quiet afforded by the summer-house.

She was not, however, to remain undisturbed, for she had been there scarcely ten minutes when a rustling and crackling among the foliage was followed by the instantaneous appearance before her of a man whose advent was so sudden that she gave an involuntary scream.

Hardly had she glanced at him, when she shudderingly averted her looks, and shielding her visage with her hands, made no attempt to conceal her agitation.

The person who had so suddenly intruded (he must have leaped or clambered over the fence separating the garden from the paddock) was apparently rather past the middle age, stout, dark, and a foreigner.

His heavy black mustache lent fierceness to the expression of features good in themselves,

yet commonplace withal, and his cheeks had the purple bloom of suppressed whiskers, whose hue would be sable if allowed to grow. His black eyes were, on the whole, mild and inexpressive, the occasional truculence of his appearance proceeding from the lower part of the countenance.

No wonder Mrs. Farrell was agitated as this individual stood before her.

Not because there was any cause of fear, for the intruder smiled, in a way which he intended to be reassuring, but because in him she recognized a man whom she had known in the past, whom in the present she would willingly forget.

Speaking in a low, ingratiating tone, the Frenchman (such he unmistakably was) said, as he folded his arms after the manner of the first Napoleon, "Mrs. Farrell will pardon the intrusion of—of an old friend" (the speaker's English was slow, and spoken with a disposition to lapse into his native tongue) "who hopes to renovate—to have the pleasure—of her friendship."

"Alphonse Baudouin, I thought I had done with you forever!—that you had gone never to return to this country again, when, twenty years ago, you caused me so much misery."

The widow stopped short, her recollections of the past being, it seemed, too much for her composure.

"If I caused pain, can I not atone, madame? But, first, will you not allow me to sit by your side in this retreat so charming?"

"Well, sir, you may!" replied Mrs. Farrell, regaining her self-possession by a great effort, and at last looking her interlocutor full in the face.

Monsieur Baudouin sat down—or, rather, glided unobtrusively into a seat at her side.

They regarded one another for a few seconds with mutual curiosity, each noting the effect time had had on the other.

Mrs. Farrell saw in the individual we have recently described a stouter, but not improved, edition of a young Frenchman she had known and loved, under circumstances which need not be dwelt upon at present, in years gone by; while he likewise came to the conclusion that the widow had certainly not added to her attractions; for, whereas as a girl, she had been a decidedly pretty blonde, her complexion had now become red and coarse. Her figure, in gaining bulk, had lost all grace; and her yellow hair had such a decidedly artificial look as to favor the belief that it was a poor substitute for the cloud of golden locks he had so greatly admired as they floated over her white shoulders when he first met her at a school at Pimlico, where he was the French master.

Nevertheless, Monsieur Baudouin gallantly said, "Madame, you bear your years so well that I shall say that it is since we met, not twenty, but ten years."

"I do not desire to hear you speak to me in that strain, and will not listen if you do!" said Mrs. Farrell, secretly pleased, nevertheless. "Answer me two questions. How came you here? And why are you here?"

"I came o'air the fence from that field where the horses cantair about, and my object in coming is—"

He paused thoughtfully.

"Money?" suggested Mrs. Farrell, with a sneer.

"Oui, madame—money, of course; no need to tell you that; but I was thinking of othair things. I want to be of service to you. I do, indeed," he added, in a droll tone of humility.

With what object? Useless to look at this man for any betrayal of motive. His little jet eyes twinkled like beads, so good-humoredly that their possessor looked quite prepossessing for the moment; but lowering her glance to his mouth, Mrs. Farrell felt a creepy sensation, so striking was the contrast presented by the lower part of the countenance to the upper, the mouth and jaw having a disagreeable, sinister expression.

Then Mrs. Farrell fell into thought, and

seemed to forget the presence of her companion, who watched her closely.

"There are many ways in which I might be of service to you," he said presently, in a voice that seemed to travel cautiously up to her thoughts. "You are forming plans for your future life, and you may need assistance in those aspirations," he concluded with a flourish.

"What know you of my plans?" demanded Mrs. Farrell, with a sudden start.

"Almost e-e-e-everything, Alice," was the softly spoken reply.

The weak woman started as she heard her Christian name uttered by this man. She remembered how often the same voice had whispered it in her ear, and how pleasantly it had fallen in her earlier life. And now how should she act? Accept the proffered renewal of his friendship—he had said nothing about love, she reflected—or send him about his business defiantly? Would his friendship be safe, or would it be dangerous? And on the other hand, could she safely defy him?

She hardly knew; she wanted more time to think it out, and so determined to temporize.

The man seemed to read her thoughts, for his manner changed suddenly; and, rising excitedly, he seized her hand roughly, saying, in a fierce whisper, "Is it or is it not true that you aspire to marrying one of your girls to the new—the young Earl of Verdon? And answer me one o'air question. Is it your daughter whom you would thus marry, or is it the other one?"

"My daughter!" whispered Mrs. Farrell, faintly.

"Ha, ha! You know what I mean when I say the o'air one. And now will you not take me further into your confidence, my dear friend? If you can plan, I can plot." He paused to watch the effect of his words. "And togethair we may, what you call, make something of it."

Mrs. Farrell would have gladly (had she dared) scorned, defied him—at least, that was one phase of feeling within her bosom; but it alternated with another that rose in rivalry, having its birth in the recollection of her former tender feeling toward Baudouin, and inclining her heart to be less severe. And so, deliberating, she said, reluctantly, "Come with me into the house; there is no reason, perhaps, why we should not be friends."

Monsieur Baudouin, however, replied, indifferently, "There is no hurry, madame. To-day I prefer to return as I did come—o'air that fence. Another day I will per-haps do myself the honor, and call in pro'pair form. Adieu!"

So saying, to Mrs. Farrell's inexpressible relief, the Frenchman disappeared as quickly as he came.

Alphonse Baudouin soon made his way through an outlet in the paddock into the high road, along which he walked quietly until he approached the gates of Verdon Park.

"I was right—very right," he mused, "not to seem too eager; not to make myself what they call in England too cheap."

Lighting a cigarette, he strolled along a narrow path that skirted Verdon Park; and, as he caught an occasional glimpse of the mansion through the trees, smoked and schemed, the drift of his scheming being to scrape an acquaintance with the young Lord Verdon as soon as he could.

"Everything does come to him who does know how to wait." So said 'the Man of December,' he reflected, "and I will wait patiently."

CHAPTER V.

GETTING WELL.

It is five weeks from the day on which the Countess of Verdon called on Mrs. Farrell, as described in a previous chapter, where, it will be remembered, the latter promised that her daughter Mary should nurse Lady Verdon's niece.

Mary Farrell went, as arranged, and soon

won "golden opinions" from all among whom she found herself.

Impossible that there could be a gentler, kinder girl, or one more filled by the possession of a happy instinct that taught her how best to make herself agreeable at the bedside of an invalid than Mary Farrell. She knew exactly what things to talk about, and what to avoid; was always cheerful, yet always subdued; and acquitted herself in every way in her self-imposed task so greatly to the satisfaction of the Countess that she soon found her original predisposition in the young girl's favor merging into a warm friendship for her.

Mary's charge, as already intimated, was Lady Verdon's niece, whose parents resided at Naples, and it was at her ladyship's earnest invitation that she had returned with her to England.

In this Lady Verdon had an object, and a very worthy one, in view.

Among her son's college friends none held, or better deserved to hold, a higher place in his esteem than Walter Cornish, a young man about the same age as the Earl of Verdon, with whom he was on most intimate terms.

Walter Cornish was the son of a Manchester man—a wealthy cotton-spinner, whose affluence enabled him to gratify his son's every wish, or, for that matter, every extravagance.

Happily, however, the wishes of the cotton-spinner's son never went beyond reason.

He took a quiet, yet cheerful, philosophical view of most things; had a pleasant vein of humor, which Lord Verdon admired; and was one of those thoroughly agreeable fellows who will make themselves at home in any society, and who find themselves popular everywhere.

The Countess of Verdon shared her son's good opinion of the cotton-spinner's son, and one day it suddenly struck her that Walter Cornish would make her niece, Adeline Wentworth, a good husband. He was, in a worldly point of view, an eligible match; while his manners were those of a perfect gentleman, being free from the faintest trace of affectation, and thus it was that Lady Verdon found herself planning to effect an introduction between them.

This was an easy task, and a scarcely more difficult one was encountered when she next strove to bring about that feeling of interest in each other which, in the case of young people, very good-looking and naturally prepossessed, soon ripens into love.

Lady Verdon, much sooner even than she expected, had the satisfaction to find herself completely successful in her good-natured effort at match-making.

She was a novice at the craft, and never desired to become more experienced in it.

The professed match-maker she detested; but believing that she saw the way to secure the worldly happiness of her niece, she did all she could to that end without feeling a desire to achieve a similar success among her friends at large.

Miss Wentworth had only recently plighted her troth to Walter Cornish, when her lover was compelled to take a trip to America to identify a defaulting clerk who had robbed his father to a large amount, and had been tracked by the detectives to New York.

He was, of course, very reluctant to go; but there was no help for it, and he promised Adeline—his engagement to whom met with his father's warm approval—that he would cross and recross the "herring-pond" without a moment's waste of time.

He kept his word, and returned to England to find Adeline gradually recovering from her illness, and no one was more grateful to Mary Farrell for her careful nursing of Lady Verdon's niece than that young lady's devoted swain, Walter Cornish.

But the lovers were destined to be parted almost as soon as reunited, Walter being suddenly summoned to Manchester one day on account of the illness of his mother.

Adeline Wentworth may be described as a charming girl, bright as sunshine, possessing

delicately fair features of the true Saxon type, azure eyes, and golden hair. She attracted all by her gentle, winning manner, and the tone of her mind was gay without being frivolous.

Of her parents, we shall have occasion to speak in a future chapter.

Miss Wentworth rapidly regained her strength after her illness had taken a favorable turn; but neither she nor the Countess of Verdon would hear of Mary Farrell's departure from the Hall at present—in fact, they were ever ready, it seemed, to invent some fresh excuse to detain her whenever she talked of leaving them.

"I am getting well too fast," said Miss Wentworth to her one morning, as, seated in a charming boudoir, where a pink hue predominated in seeming encouragement of the return of the roses to the invalid's cheeks, she chatted gayly with Mary. "If you say another word about leaving me for another three weeks at least, you will bring about a relapse, and so undo all the good you have done."

"You are all very kind to me," returned Mary Farrell, "and are making my life like a fairy dream. You had better let me go before you have quite spoiled me."

Pleased as she looked, grateful as she felt, a sigh escaped her.

"Promise me one thing, now, at once," said Adeline; "that you will always let me regard you as one of my dearest friends; and, do you know, Lady Verdon thinks that we are very much alike."

"I have heard her say so," replied Mary, thoughtfully.

"So that being the case," continued Miss Wentworth, gayly, "we can fancy we are sisters, and shall perhaps like each other as warmly as if we really were. I can speak for myself," she added, tenderly, "and truly say, dear Mary, that I feel your love necessary for my perfect happiness."

"And I, Adeline, dear Adeline, if I may so call you, can as truthfully say that I have never known what it is to be so fond of a sister as I am of you," rejoined Mary Farrell, speaking rather sadly, and not without tears.

Miss Wentworth rose and embraced her companion affectionately. It would be difficult to imagine a more pleasing contrast than that presented by the two girls as they clung lovingly together. Adeline's slender figure, the delicate tints of her hair and complexion, and the striking decision of her friend's more robust yet perfectly feminine and English type of beauty, combined with the firmness and self-reliance her expression indicated, told of two different natures—the one a dancing sunbeam, gilding with magical touch every object it came in contact with; the other a ray of light likewise, but the quieter gleam that you come across here and there among the dark shades of a gloomy forest.

"I sometimes think that the course of true friendship, like that of true love, does not always run smooth," said Mary Farrell, pensively.

"Who talks of true love?" exclaimed the voice of some one who opened the door of the apartment, tentatively, as he spoke. "May I come in?" added the speaker; and then, in obedience to a ready assent from Adeline Wentworth, a strikingly handsome young man, in his twenty-second year, entered, gracefully advancing toward the young ladies, a cordial greeting on his lips.

The intruder, as he laughingly called himself, was Vance, Earl of Verdon, in person tall, well-formed—a strong frame, moving with a singularly fascinating, easy and unobtrusive demeanor—with a high forehead, a head adorned by curly brown hair, and a frank, bright glance that was very winning.

"My dear cousin," he said to Adeline, "how glad I am to find that you are getting on so famously! When young ladies begin to talk about the course of true love, it is a sure sign that there can't be much the matter with them," he added, lightly.

"Or a great deal," laughingly rejoined Miss

Wentworth. "Besides, it was Mary who was talking about true love, so you are wrong altogether."

"I could have sworn it was your voice," replied Lord Verdon; "and my being mistaken only proves how much your tones are alike."

"You hear that, Mary! More proof that we ought to have been sisters, if we are not!" exclaimed Adeline.

"But we are to be true friends, dear Adeline," returned Mary.

"I really must beg to be included in the bond of friendship—of eternal friendship which, after the manner of most young ladies you have, I suppose, mutually subscribed to," interposed Lord Verdon.

"Willingly," said Miss Wentworth. "You hear what he says, Mary. I think we must admit him within the magic circle—he may be useful. So, sir knight, if we ever call upon you to draw sword in our defense, we shall rely on you to perform your duty."

"I swear lifelong fealty to each and both of you, fair maidens," said the young lord, gallantly. "There's many a true word spoken in jest," he added, turning to Mary; "and should Miss Farrell ever need a friend, she will always find me devoted to her service."

Mary Farrell, with a bright glance, looked up at him for a moment, as if to thank him, then the warm color mounting to her cheeks, she bent her head low in confusion.

A few minutes later she contrived to slip out of the room.

"Is she not charming?" said Miss Wentworth to her cousin, directly she was alone with him.

"Charming! Words would fail to express half the admiration I feel for Miss Farrell!" returned Lord Verdon.

"O—oh!" remarked the lively Adeline. "Well, for my part, I must say that I would rather have an admirer whose words would not fail to express all that he felt for me; but then, you see, the fewer our claims on the opposite sex, the more exacting we are."

"No doubt. I pity poor Walter Cornish from the bottom of my heart."

"My dear cousin, to be serious for a moment," said Miss Wentworth, rising quietly, and laying one hand on Lord Verdon's shoulder as she looked earnestly in his face, "I have a presentiment that Mary Farrell will some day need friends. You, mixing in the world, Vance, and seeing so many charming creatures, may soon forget the dear girl with whom we are all so delighted now. I want you to promise me that you will never forget Mary Farrell?"

"I promise you, fair cousin, that I will never forget Mary Farrell," replied Lord Verdon, with so much emphasis that Adeline was more than satisfied—surprised; and after he had left her she repeated his words thoughtfully to herself, a bright smile now and again indicating that her reflections were of a very agreeable nature.

CHAPTER VI.

"LOVE RULES THE COURT, THE CAMP THE GROVE."

MARY FARRELL, dressed in her simple walking costume, wandered into the park to enjoy, undisturbed, a half-hour's ramble, for the conversation just detailed with her gentle patient and Lord Verdon had filled her bosom with undefined emotions.

Had she been a vain girl, eager for compliments, as most girls are, in a conventional way, or one on whom the effect of the good opinion of others is only to increase their self-esteem in a relative ratio, a pleasant feeling of pride would have flushed her cheek and excited her brain, and her head would have been turned at an early period in the course of her brief stay at Verdon Hall, but such was not the nature of Mary Farrell.

She felt a modest satisfaction in knowing that she had the power to make friends; but, with the diffidence peculiar to true worth, was on that account all the more anxious to de-

termine in her own mind how far she really merited the esteem she had won.

"After all, what have I done?" she asked herself. "No great service; not risking infection, for there was none, nor making any great sacrifice; and yet they think so much of me, and seem so sincerely to mean all they say, that I might be pardoned were I to fancy—"

Here she resolutely broke the thread of her reflections, for the answers that suggested themselves to the crowd of questions she found herself putting in the progress of her reverie only allowed her to feel that she must in some way have deserved all those unstudied marks of good-will of which she had been the recipient; for if there was one virtue more prominent than another in the character of Lady Verdon, her son, and Adeline Wentworth, as shown in their demeanor toward others, it was their simple, truthful sincerity of speech.

They never flattered, even in jest; sometimes their candor seemed redeemed from brusqueness only by the controlling influence of their never-failing gentleness of manner bred of gentle birth.

She walked on, now looking back to admire the mansion behind her, now surveying with greater enthusiasm the splendid prospect of which it was the center.

Verdon Hall was a happy combination of the old and the new, and in this it reflected the minds of its owners, for the Verdon of to-day never, on the one hand, clung to an institution simply because it was old, nor, on the other, thought that the newness of an idea guaranteed its perfection. Intrinsic merit, and that alone, it was to which they pinned their faith, whether dealing with the past or present.

There was no pleasanter spot for a quiet walk in the whole of the fair demesne than the avenue of lime-trees planted a short distance from and at the rear of the Hall, and thither Mary Farrell traced her steps.

The bright light green of the leaves had a delightfully soothing and refreshing appearance, borrowing brilliancy from the sunbeams, yet mitigating their intensity. A gentle breeze breathed music into the ear, as it lovingly caressed the spreading boughs, and the greensward beneath was as soft and delicate as the cheek of beauty.

In perfect accord with the naturalness of the scene was the aspect of our heroine, whose simplicity of manner and movement, charming anywhere was, amid such surroundings, especially appropriate to the "fitness of things." Her cheek was paler, her look more downcast than usual, but her step was firm, betraying the inherent resolution of her mind.

She reached the extremity of the avenue, and paused, apparently in doubt for a moment whether to extend her walk through the tempting glades that lay beyond, or to turn back. She chose the latter course, to find herself, when she had reached the center of the avenue, face to face with Lord Verdon, who, walking rapidly, came upon her so suddenly that he caused her to flush with mingled surprise and confusion.

The next moment, as it seemed, she was quite at ease, and walking quietly by his side.

"You left us, as I fancied, rather mysteriously just now, so I shall claim the privilege of treating you as an escaped bird far too valuable to be at liberty, and shall hold you captive."

"The bird must, however, soon fly away in good earnest, and become of neither greater nor less value than—than a London sparrow," was the light reply.

"Ah, you're going to London. Do I rightly conjecture that you don't altogether fancy the change?" said Lord Verdon.

"It is mamma who is all for town life and its pleasures; for myself, I prefer those of the country."

"I thought so," replied the Earl of Verdon, in an appreciative tone. "Let us extend our walk, and talk of the future—your future, in which, to be candid, I am bound to take a great, a very great interest."

"How can Lord Verdon feel bound to take

an interest in one so much"—she paused, as if well weighing her words—"so much beneath him as myself?" asked Mary.

She saw—yet somehow was not surprised to see—that her closing words clouded with momentary displeasure the open brow of the young lord, who, however, continued speaking in the same tone of light earnestness.

"By my word pledged to my cousin, Adeline Wentworth; but the heaviest penance she might impose on me for any defection of the duty I have undertaken—gladly undertaken—would be as light as a feather compared with that I should impose on myself for the same fault."

Mary said nothing; but her breath came quickly, and she could not control the flush that tinged her cheeks.

"Let us wander as far as yon beech-tree, whose shade looks tempting. The trees, like prodigal friends who have been too lavish of their hospitality, will soon be without roofs under which to receive us."

"And, as true friends, we should not desert them in the hour of adversity."

"You believe in friendship?" said Lord Verdon.

"I do; in the true spirit of faith."

"And that?"

"Teaches us to believe without doubting that which we cannot see. Friendship is rare!"

How bright, how keen was the admiration expressed in the glance of the Earl of Verdon as he looked down on Mary Farrell, who, walking by his side, was all unconscious of the effect not only of what she had just said, but of the whole tone of her mind—the ease with which she spoke, which no thought of the disparity of their rank in life could affect, it was so spontaneous—her personal beauty—on her companion.

It seemed to him that in the course of the last few minutes she had made such a rapid advance in his esteem that surely some supernatural agency must be at work; else how should he come to know her all at once, as it were; to feel exactly in that stage of friendship which he could only have otherwise reached after weeks, months, of social intercourse; that stage which, when reached, so often takes a new departure?

"See, here we are at the beech-tree!" he said, softly, as they came to a pleasant eminence, where, among a cluster of smaller trees, an old beech spread out its branches, and round whose trunk was a wooden seat.

"I always loved this spot," he continued, "it is so quiet, and the view is charming. You will observe, Miss Farrell, that it is only the older portion of the Hall that you can see from here; the modernized part of the building is hidden from view; so that when one is in a romantic mood, and disposed to go back instead of forward, you have only to come to this spot to sustain the illusion."

"I know the view well," said Mary—"that is to say, I have always felt drawn this way. Why, I know not; but it is very pleasant, as you say, and has generally been my walk."

She spoke rather hurriedly, nervously, as if more for the sake of saying something, than to utter words that should express exactly what she meant or wished to say.

"It was here that I made love, in years long passed, to your little sister Millicent, when we swore to be true. Of course, there was nothing in it beyond the merest juvenile flirtation, and your sister has, no doubt, forgotten the—the incident,"—Lord Verdon's utterance was strangely labored—"quite forgotten it."

He looked at his companion as if for a reply.

"Lord Verdon may be sure that—that Millicent Farrell's heart was not broken," said Mary, remembering the conversation (detailed in our first chapter) that she had with her sister on the cliffs.

Both Lord Verdon and Mary Farrell grew awkward and constrained in their manner. The former had something to say, yet hesi-

tated to say it; while the latter felt intuitively that the young Earl was, like herself, drifting into the listless condition of a sailing yacht becalmed, or a balloon motionless in the air.

Her mind was becoming trance-like. Strange, undefined, yet ineffably sweet visions of fairy texture seemed to envelop her in a mist of enchantment, wherein she was bound hand and foot, awake, yet bereft of all power of motion, as we may feel in a dream sometimes; while beside her was sitting one whom she regarded as a potent magician, for it was under his influence—silken bondage that it was—she felt herself to have fallen.

At last he spoke, his tones rich, low and earnest.

"I did not bring you here to tell you of my schoolboy attachment to your sister, Miss Farrell, save as leading up to an attachment not juvenile, but manly—not formed to be forgotten in after years, but to endure for a lifetime—a love of sudden, but none the less sure, growth. Mary, such is my love for you! May I hope to win yours in return?"

For a second Mary Farrell almost lost the sense of her own identity, so sudden was Lord Verdon's declaration.

It was not so much that she was taken by surprise to find that he loved her at all—for it had for some days past been gradually dawning upon her that he regarded her with feelings which, had their worldly positions been more equal, might have ended in a tender avowal—but that she was amazed by the electric rapidity with which he had confessed his own love, and asked for hers in return; astounded by the new position in which the utterance of a few words on his part had placed her toward him, the Earl of Verdon, one of the highest in the land, with a fond mother, becomingly proud of her son, who would naturally look forward to his marrying one of his own order; a stately home, of glorious associations—a home into which she had, it might—nay, would—be said by the ungenerous, should it ever get abroad that Lord Verdon had given her the chance of making it her own, thrust herself, with an unworthy project, springing from ambition, in her heart.

She turned pale through the intensity of her emotion, and said, "Lord Verdon, this—this cannot be!"

"You mean that you do not love me? Answer me one question: *Could* you love me?"

She looked at him timidly, and he was answered to his satisfaction.

"How could she help loving one so noble, handsome, and inflexibly straightforward in everything as he?" she thought; "and how could she avoid answering his simple question?"

"Lord Verdon, you asked me just now if I did love you, and now you ask me if I could. I will answer the last question. The love you nobly, loyally offer me I feel that I could as truly return—"

"Then, dear Mary—" he interposed, taking her hand in his own.

"Stay; hear me out!" she went on, eagerly. "I could love you, as I freely admit; but—but Mary Farrell can never become the wife of the Earl of Verdon!"

"And why not?"

"Because, liberal as the Verdon's are; little as they think of their title, their broad lands; lovingly as they would all indorse, and, as I heard one of them say, lingering on the words of the poet—

"Kind hearts are more than coronets,
And simple faith than Norman blood,"

yet they must not (whatever they *may* do to show their disregard of social disparities, as a rule) marry beneath them."

"And will you, my sweet but severe mentor, be pleased to tell me what is marrying beneath one?"

"Such a marriage as ours would be," she said, sadly; though for a moment a yearning thrill of delight had rushed through her heart, ending with a sigh, like to the lightsome sum-

mer breeze sometimes when swiftly passing through the trees.

"Where there is perfect love there must be perfect equality," he remarked.

"If we alone were concerned, your argument might be unanswerable, Lord Verdon," was her reply.

"Whom have I to please but myself?"

"Your mother," answered Mary.

But instead of looking grave, as she expected he would, at the mention of his mother's name, in admission of Lady Verdon's right to have an important voice in the matter, he only laughed lightly, and said, "My dear mother and I have never known what it is to differ in the slightest degree. We have always agreed—invariably been of one mind. Never probably have the relations between mother and son been so constantly unclouded as with us. Ever since I can remember, we have lived together in an atmosphere of love, resembling one long, bright, cloudless day in August, when on the face of nature everything is mellowed, placid, and in perfect repose. And as certain as I ever felt or could feel about anything in this world, when there were no elements of uncertainty worth taking into account, do I feel that my dear mother, who has shared almost my every thought, pleasure, and sorrow, will, on hearing of my choice, stamp it with the mark of her honored approval."

Lord Verdon spoke so decidedly, and in a tone of such calm conviction, that Mary Farrell felt hope springing up within her breast. In spite of all her sense of unworthiness, of the feeling that the idea of her becoming the wife of the Earl of Verdon had never been rivaled in point of wildness, she was beginning to admit that such a union was "just possible;" and from what is "just possible" to the region of probability is a short step when our inclinations go in the same direction.

"What you say should make us very happy," she said.

"And does it not, dear Mary?" asked Lord Verdon, bending lovingly over her.

"You might regret, after all, marrying a poor girl. There are so many who are good and not poor, and it would be more prudent for Lord Verdon to seek among them for a bride," urged Mary.

"I feel almost angry with you for speaking in this strain," said Lord Verdon.

"I am trying to say what I ought to say—not what I wish," she returned, gently.

"Then hear me," he cried passionately. "I love you so deeply that I feel my whole worldly happiness depends on you—you, dear Mary, the bright star of existence—fixed, firm, luminous, round which all the small, petty pleasures of life, like falling meteors, will drop out of sight, as insignificant as evanescent."

He gazed upon her earnestly, and eagerly awaited some response. It came when, forgetting everything but the love she had striven to banish from her heart, she allowed the bright scene of flowers and foliage, the brilliant light of the cloudless day, to fade from her view as her head sunk upon Lord Verdon's shoulder.

"My heart is yours," she murmured.

And he, as happy in the knowledge that she loved him as if she had been a princess in rank, bent tenderly over her.

In the evening of the same day Lord Verdon went to his mother's private room. Lady Verdon always knew that, whenever her son sought her presence at such a time, it was for the enjoyment of a pleasant chat; but on the present occasion she saw at a glance that he had something unusually serious in its nature to communicate, for he looked anxious and full of thought as he kissed her, and quietly sat down by her side.

The Countess of Verdon watched her son's expression with eager, affectionate solicitude.

"You look tired, Vance, and oppressed; but, whatever the cause, I know that it must be of recent origin."

"You are right, dearest mother; I keep nothing from you, and I am here now to tell you what may surprise, but, I venture to hope, will not pain you."

For once, Lady Verdon noticed that her son's looks seemed to belie his speech, and she was partly right. He was thinking of certain words that Mary Farrell had uttered, words betraying an intuitive knowledge of the world, when she had laid down the proposition that, whatever the Verdon might do, they must not marry beneath them. And he thought to himself, "What if, after all, my gentle mother, fond, indulgent, and sympathetic as she is always, may yet not exactly like the idea of my making Mary Farrell Countess of Verdon?"

The supposition that Lady Verdon might even resolutely veto and oppose by every means in her power the alliance did not cross his thoughts. That he would have considered altogether beyond the region of probability; but at the same time he reflected that the revelation that he was about to make to her must—even if she took, as he fondly hoped she would, the most favorable view of it, and one thoroughly in consonance with his own—still come as a sort of shock to her, for surely nothing could be further from her thoughts than the suspicion of his loving Miss Farrell, still less of his having declared his love to her.

"My dear mother," he began, "it would surprise you, doubtless, were I to tell you that I have been seeking for one fit to become my wife, one worthy to become your daughter?"

"It would, indeed, Vance," answered Lady Verdon; "because I should expect that, before 'seeking,' as you put it, for a wife in the methodical way your words imply, you would consult me as to a proper choice."

The Countess of Verdon spoke quietly. She knew that something important was coming from her son's lips, and her self-possession, always indicating the true dignity of her character, was perfect.

"But you would be less surprised were I to confess that, without any 'method in my madness,' as some would call it, I have met and loved one whom it is the most cherished desire of my heart to marry."

"Your equal, Vance?" asked Lady Verdon, with intense but studiously subdued anxiety.

"Not in rank, not in a worldly point of view, but she is a lady, beautiful, clever, one who would adorn the very highest position, be equal to any occasion."

"Her name? Oh, Vance, my son, tell me quickly—my noble boy, your mother's heart beats anxiously!"

"She is well, and I believe favorably, known to you as Mary Farrell."

"Oh, Vance—can it be? Relief and regret come together in my mind. Worthy Mary Farrell undoubtedly is; but, notwithstanding that, she can never be your wife."

"And why not, dear mother?"

"Come into the library, and I will tell you," was Lady Verdon's answer, as, rising from her seat with an air of one who has a disagreeable duty to perform and sufficient strength of mind not to shirk it, she walked resolutely from the room, her son following.

The library of Verdon Hall was a splendid apartment, simple and solid in its appointments. Rare and numberless were the tomes arranged on its shelves, well placed the statuettes adorning its corners—each niche telling of the classic past or the prosaic present (though if all "books," like all times, are "good when they are old," the authors of to-day may look hopefully to posterity for their laurels)—while on the tables were placed reading lamps, diffusing a soft light around.

Lady Verdon went straight to an antique cabinet, and quickly laid her hand on what she sought, a legal-looking manuscript, which she gave her son.

"There, Vance, read and judge for yourself. This document was placed in the hands of your father by the late Mr. Farrell, who was anxious to enlist the Earl's sympathies

on behalf of his children. Your father promised that they should never want a friend to advise or help them; and when on his death-bed a year later, told me much concerning the relations existing between Mr. Farrell and his wife, at the same time asking me to befriend their children, should the conduct of their mother after his demise prejudice their worldly position. To this I readily assented—not, however, I must confess, thinking it very probably that we should ever keep up an acquaintance with Mrs. Farrell and her daughters, or that I should see my way to interfere between them in the event of any such contingency as Mr. Farrell had in mind when he took your father into his confidence, arising; and it was not until after I had become interested in Mary Farrell that I took the trouble to look into this paper, which I had understood contained nothing beyond what I had already heard from my husband. But I was much mistaken; it does contain something which Mr. Farrell had not revealed to your father in conversation before he died, and those further particulars, my dear Vance, relate to the birth of Mary Farrell."

"No more, mother. I am convinced that you could tell me that which would stifle hope and raise despair within my bosom. I prefer to read it for myself and by myself—the blow may then be more easily borne. So leave me, that I may learn the worst, and then I will come to you for comfort."

Without another word, but with a parting glance full of affectionate sympathy, Lady Verdon left the library.

An hour later, and Lord Verdon, his cheek blanched and with a look of overpowering grief on his countenance, folded with mechanical precision the manuscript his mother had given him, and securing it under lock and key, resumed his seat to battle with his disappointment.

And every now and then, in the midst of his reflections, a voice seemed to repeat to him, whispering, with mournful persistency, in his ear, the words Mary Farrell had uttered a few brief hours ago: "Mary Farrell can never become the wife of the Earl of Verdon," until, worn out and sick at heart, he went to his chamber to seek relief in sleep, which came not.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. FARRELL IN LONDON.

WE must now pass over a period of four months, and enter the London home of Mrs. Farrell, a showy house in the Camden Road, where we find that lady, with a perseverance worthy of a better cause, obstinately clinging to the skirts of the world of fashion, or what she conceived to be such.

There were many drawbacks, as she was obliged to admit, and events had not turned out satisfactorily, nor at all agreeably to her wishes, since she had left the country.

The girls—Millicent and Mary—were, to her great disappointment, not seconding her efforts to make a mark in society.

Millicent took kindly, it was true, to the (in Mrs. Farrell's opinion) minor attractions of town life—theatricals, concerts, entertainments, and so on—but showed no genius for the higher role of "leading lady," surrounded by a host of admirers, and bent upon hooking the most eligible match among them. So far from displaying the necessary energy and spirit to push herself forward among the "first flight" in the field, she showed a disposition to lag a long way behind.

She, of course, soon found herself attended by a score of cavaliers, attracted by her generally amiable and prepossessing qualities, but not one among them was suited to her taste.

Nor did they come up to the requirements of her ambitious mother, who, while never losing sight of her grand ambition, which was to see Millicent the wife of the Earl of Verdon, yet allowed herself to be influenced to a certain extent by a tacit recognition of the adage

which declares "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."

According to her light, the first duty of a young girl was to gain a lover as quickly as possible, and the first duty of her mother to see that she was "engaged" without unnecessary delay.

Perhaps, too, she was influenced by the inward conviction that the result of her scheming to hook Vance, Earl of Verdon, for her son-in-law would probably be failure, not success.

At all events, a little harmless flirtation on Millicent's part with one or another of the soft-headed swains who danced attendance on her would do no harm, and might end in her winning a prize in the matrimonial market.

But Millicent Farrell, if superficial, was decidedly not senseless, only her sense was mixed with a lot of useless sentiment. Had she shared her mother's designing disposition, she would, very probably, have found no difficulty in making what the world calls a good match; but she was, in reality, too good a girl to give her hand without her heart when it came to the point.

She had read a good deal, and to good purpose, for hers was a receptive mind, happily predisposed to imbibe only that which was good.

"I am growing weary of my admirers, mamma," she said to her parent, one day; "and are not you? From my point of view they have too little in their brains—from yours, too little in their pockets. If marriage be a lottery, suppose I try the casket plan, 'gold, silver, and lead,' and decide my fate as *Portia's* was decided in the 'Merchant of Venice'?"

"I know nothing of the 'Merchant of Venice,' my dear; but should say it would be safer for you to give the preference to a merchant in the City—they are so very substantial!" replied Mrs. Farrell.

This little talk will have plainly shown that Mrs. Farrell did not quite understand her daughter.

As for Mary, she had become an enigma—worse, an object of aversion to Mrs. Farrell, who was enraged to find her, on her leaving Verdon Hall, strangely reticent concerning her stay there, and indisposed to refer to the smallest incident connected with that episode in her young life.

This did not prevent the widow referring to her daughter's visit to Verdon Hall, when in company, in a way that made her friends smile, producing contempt rather than the feeling of envy she desired to arouse in their minds; and great was the annoyance Mary repeatedly caused her by alluding to the fact of her "only having gone there to nurse Lady Verdon's niece," which Mrs. Farrell herself always suppressed.

The "plain, unvarnished tale" Mary invariably told whenever Mrs. Farrell broached the subject in the presence of acquaintances, while it never failed to win her their admiration for the candor she evinced, contrasting, as it did, so refreshingly with Mrs. Farrell's "veneering" process, caused something worse than coolness to spring up between her and her mother.

Lady Verdon had written a letter full of warm thanks to Mrs. Farrell for her goodness in giving her daughter the opportunity to be of the very great service she had been to her and her niece, in which she also spoke of the esteem in which she would ever hold Mary; but, strange to say—at least, so it struck Mrs. Farrell—there was not a word in her ladyship's letter about future friendship to herself or Millicent.

"I remember what she said," reflected the scheming widow, "and I'll keep her up to it."

Soon after this it was chronicled in the daily papers that the Countess of Verdon and her son, the Earl, had both left England for the Continent.

"They are sure to be back in time for the London season," thought Mrs. Farrell; "and then—"

The precise nature of the widow's plans were hardly clearly defined, even in her own mind—that is, beyond a certain point. She was determined at any cost to become numbered among the friends of Lord Verdon and his mother—that alone would be an unspeakable advantage—after that she would, like all sensible people, be guided by circumstances.

A few weeks later on, the same journals that had announced the departure of the Verdon conveyed the welcome intelligence of their return.

By way of opening the campaign, Mrs. Farrell, inventing a simple excuse, wrote a short letter to Lord Verdon, begging him, as a favor, to introduce her to a good French master for her dear children.

Their French was not what it might be, she hinted—the true Parisian accent, she had been told by her friends (she herself, unhappily, was not a competent judge)—was entirely wanting; and the same friends, she said, had assured her that there were a few, but only a few, competent professors of the universal language in London, and one of these, at least, she was sure must be known to Lord Verdon.

She received a prompt reply. The day after that on which she had posted her letter to the Earl of Verdon, he sent her round, duly armed with a letter of introduction, the required French tutor in his own proper person, and, to her astonishment and dismay, she recognized in the bowing and smiling Gaul who stood in her presence Alphonse Baudouin.

CHAPTER VIII.

BAUDOUIN AND THE WIDOW—A TRUSTEE NOT TO BE TRUSTED.

"I HEAR from *mon ami*, my very particular kind patron, Lord Verdon, that you require my services, madame?" said this worthy, noting the flush of surprise that rose to the face of Mrs. Farrell, and which seemed to amuse him; "and therefore I am here."

He placed his hand theatrically upon his heart, bowed with profound *empressement*, and then quietly extending his hand gave the letter of introduction to the widow.

She took it, and read its contents eagerly. They were brief. Lord Verdon only expressed, in terms simple and polite, the pleasure it gave him to be of the smallest service to Mrs. Farrell, and remarked that the bearer, Monsieur Baudouin, had been in his service for some weeks past, engaged on certain translations, which required the greatest care in execution, in which task he had given him complete satisfaction, and expressing the opinion that his abilities would exactly meet her requirements.

"And by what trick or stratagem did you contrive to ingratiate yourself in the favor of the Earl of Verdon?" demanded Mrs. Farrell, scrutinizing her quondam admirer with, it must be confessed, some admiration in her look.

"By pretending to be *vair* ill—taken suddenly in his country grounds, and then working upon his good nature, and saying that I was one poor Frenchman starving. But may I make myself at home with you?"

A barely audible affirmative escaped the widow.

"I have news—something very grand that will startle you, to communicate," said Baudouin, taking a seat quietly by the widow's side. "But first to business—business first, you say in England—afterward the pleasure. You stand in need of lessons in French," he interposed, with a droll grin.

"That matter can wait," rejoined Mrs. Farrell. "I am convinced you have something to say that concerns me," she added, in a lower tone.

"*Vair* like; but I must not forget that the Earl of Verdon has been very, what you call kind to me, and, that in common gratitude, I ought not to betray his secrets."

"You are forgetting, also, that you once professed to love me," said the widow, with some tenderness of tone.

"No, it is not I who am forgetting, madame, it is yourself. Assure me that you love me still, and I am yours—yours to the end of the chapter," was the answer, accompanied by a look of injured innocence.

"I cannot entirely forget the—the influence you once had over me, and I am not sure that you have altogether lost it now, Alphonse," was the reply.

The Frenchman looked mollified.

"I am all anxiety to hear what it is concerning me that you have to communicate?"

"You have the intention at least, the idea, that your daughter shall marry the Earl of Verdon; that is to say, your daughter Millicent—not the *ozair* one."

"What of that? But go on," said Mrs. Farrell, quickly.

"What will you say if I tell you that Lord Verdon loves the *ozair* one—Mary Farrell, as you style her?"

"What, Mary?" (The speaker threw herself back in her chair.) "And yet her silence after her return from her visit to Verdon Hall—the way she avoided the subject whenever I spoke to her about it—her fits of abstraction—her pensiveness, made me inclined to suspect something at the time, and now convince me, against my will, that it may be so."

Musing thus, Mrs. Farrell became deeply thoughtful, and apparently oblivious of the presence of Baudouin, who stroked his black mustache, and glanced admiringly at his well-varnished boots, seemingly in no hurry to disturb her reverie.

"You do not receive these tidings with satisfaction. Well, you are right," he said at last, with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"It is a bitter disappointment, I do not deny!" said Mrs. Farrell.

"And you would give something to prevent the possibility of—of anything coming of it—that is, to ruin the girl's chance of becoming the Countess of Verdon?"

"I would give much. The Countess of Verdon! Preposterous! I never cared for that girl, and now—"

"You would not be *ovair* scrupulous, Alice? You say you would give much; would you give yourself?"

"Myself?"

"Yes; and to me! Become my wife!"

Monsieur Baudouin's eyes glared with excitement.

He was playing a cunning game for the prize within his reach, and becoming anxious as to the result.

"Before I encourage any hopes of that kind, Alphonse, you must tell me why it is you are willing to ruin the prospects of your own daughter, and with that end in view, plot with me."

"What if I were to tell you that Mary Farrell is not my daughter; and that when I told you once that the little infant I put, *evair* so many years ago, with your consent, in the place of your dead child—when your husband was away, remembair—was my own, I did deceive you, and there was no truth in me?"

"Not—not yours? Then, whose?" The widow turned pale.

"That does not matter or concern you, my dear lady, at present."

Baudouin became suddenly reserved, and Mrs. Farrell was obliged to be satisfied.

The two soon found plenty to talk about, however, a long earnest conversation being the result; and a triumphant expression gradually stole over the Frenchman's face as he found that he was rapidly regaining his old ascendancy over his companion.

It was late in the evening when Monsieur Baudouin left Mrs. Farrell's house. In the hall he was passed by a young man, who looked like a clerk; and as the glances of the two men met, a sudden light flashed across the mind of the Frenchman, who recognized Mr. Peter Puddefoot, the young man on whom, as mentioned in our first chapter, the charms of Millicent Farrell had made such an impression.

Miss Farrell was still the heroine of his day-dreams, though he had never set eyes on her since. And as Peter Puddefoot waited in the hall, and Baudouin passed into the street, he saw in him at once, beyond the shadow of a doubt in his mind, the individual who had entered his grandmother's cottage on that night when he was fortunately at hand to protect her.

Alphonse Baudouin, humming gayly to himself, a cigarette between his lips, walked lightly through the fresh air to his home—at present, only an obscure lodging in the region of Leicester Square; a home that would shortly be changed, he reflected, for a more pretentious one, if his scheming turned out as well as it promised to do.

Returning to Peter Puddefoot for a moment, we find him ushered into the dining-room of Mrs. Farrell's house.

His mission, apparently, was only to deliver a letter into the hands of some one above the rank of a servant.

He sat down in the chair that was offered him, as he was requested to wait, and then, looking shy and sheepish, searched his pocket for the letter he had about him, which found, he looked admiringly round the well-furnished apartment.

He fell into a reverie; thought of his own home; contrasted its humbleness with the comparative grandeur of that in which he, for the moment, found himself; and then sighed as he reflected that, without wealth or grandeur, how happy he could be if only, he possessed as his partner for life, the fair being, whom he had seen but once before, the bright vision that would, he believed, never fade from his memory.

His reflections were interrupted by the entry of a young lady, who advanced gracefully toward him, and he felt his breath taken away, and himself spellbound, as he saw before him the girl whose image was always in his mind.

Of course, the poor fellow became confused, and Miss Farrell looked at him for a moment, surprised.

Peter Puddefoot, making an effort to recover his self-possession, with tolerable success, handed Millicent the letter.

"It's for Mrs. Farrell," he said, in a rather faltering tone, "from Mr. Hargreaves."

Miss Farrell took it carelessly, and seemed to conclude that it was all right, signifying as much to her entranced interlocutor by a graceful inclination of the head.

Mr. Hargreaves was the trustee of the late Mr. Farrell's property under that gentleman's will, and consequently much in communication with the widow.

Our friend Peter Puddefoot, owing to the dissolution of partnership of his late employers, had been "out of a berth" for some three or four months, but had, within the last fortnight, been in the employ of Mr. Hargreaves, the vacancy in whose office had been made known by advertisement.

Mr. Puddefoot sighed involuntarily as he left Miss Farrell's presence, and she, without knowing why, found herself interested in the young fellow. He seemed to be connected with some trifling incident belonging to the past—what, she could not at present call to mind and she could not help thinking that she had seen him before.

That night Millicent retired to rest, "perchance to dream," and *did* dream, the result being that when she awoke in the morning she had encountered Peter Puddefoot on the cliffs in her vision under the same circumstances as she had done in reality; so that the identity of the ardent admirer, about whom she and her sister had jested so lightly on that occasion with Mr. Hargreaves's clerk, was clearly established in her mind.

As for Mr. Puddefoot, he, too, went to sleep—to dream of Millicent and matrimony.

The next morning he awoke disconsolate and disconcerted. His clerical labors, always faithfully performed, were not always congenial;

and this was especially the case when he happened to be in a rather more romantic mood than usual, as on the present occasion.

It was pleasant to know that her name was Millicent (he had overheard a voice—her mother's, perhaps—call her by that name on the previous evening,) he reflected, as he walked along the Borough on his way to the city.

A very little to know, but still a something; and Peter Puddefoot was disposed to be thankful for small crumbs of comfort.

That day he did his work badly, making a sad hash of his figures, for there was *one* figure always before him, quite upsetting his commercial calculations, and that was *Millicent's*!

He had fallen into a pleasant reverie when, late in the afternoon, he was startled by the apparition (for such he regarded it) of a man passing by his desk into the private room at the rear of the office; and when, to his amazement, he recognized the Frenchman whom he had ejected from his grandmother's cottage, where he was spending his holiday with that aged relative, and whom he had encountered accidentally only last night in Mrs. Farrell's house, he wondered what his business with his master could be.

Leaving him to his speculations on this point, we will accompany Alphonse Baudouin into the presence of Mr. Hargreaves.

The trustee of the late Mr. Farrell's property was a nervous, furtive-looking person, between fifty and sixty, apparently. Taken altogether, he was rather prepossessing than otherwise, for his complexion was fresh, and he had a pleasant smile.

In character he was too fond of pleasure, of extravagant habits, and weak-principled.

Had Mr. Farrell known the real character of this man, he would probably never have appointed him trustee of his property; but Mr. Hargreaves had always seemed to him all that could be desired in a man of business or a man of honor, so carefully had the shrewd lawyer played his cards with the view to ingratiate himself in the rich man's favor. The result was that he became Mr. Farrell's confidential adviser in everything.

The lawyer started when he caught sight of Baudouin as, unannounced, he stole quietly into the room, having tapped with intentional faintness at the door; for though he knew the Frenchman as a quondam friend, his present visit was as unexpected as undesired.

"Good-day!" said Monsieur Baudouin; and then, hat in hand, stood bowing and smiling before the other.

"I am very busy," said Mr. Hargreaves, who really was engaged in the attentive consideration of a pile of documents, spread out on his desk before him, and those documents referred to the estate of the late Mr. Farrell. "At any other time!" he added, with an appealing look at Baudouin.

"At no other time!" replied that worthy.

And he went up to Mr. Hargreaves, touched him lightly on the shoulder, and grinned.

"What is it?" testily asked the latter.

"I am about to marry the widow Farrell at last. It is really to be at last."

"What?"

Mr. Hargreaves seemed thunderstruck. He turned ashy pale after a moment's thought; and his fingers trembled as he played nervously with a bit of red tape.

"I thought I would let you know—that is all. Do you not take it kindly?"

Monsieur Baudouin stroked his mustache.

"If you mean what you say, Baudouin, all I've got to remark is, that I shall oppose—in the interests of Mrs. Farrell, of course—your scheme by every means in my power."

"Ah, you will?" said the Frenchman, quietly, but becoming white with rage.

The lawyer replied to that with a look of defiance.

Presently he said, "You remember, Baudouin, that now I am in no man's power."

"You are in mine!" was the answer. "The bill you forged the acceptance of when you owed me a debt of honor, for money lost to

me at *ecarte*, a few years ago, before you were so up in the world as you are now, my good friend—that little bill, I say—"

"Was destroyed by you the other night when I gave you that check."

"It was not destroyed the other night. What I did destroy was not the forgery, but a forgery of the forgery—ha, ha! And the man whose name you wrote across that bill is not dead, as I told you, for when he failed on the Stock Exchange, he did go back to his original business, and has now got a chemist's shop at Dovair."

"Dover!"

"You will take Dovair on your way to the Continent, *vairy* like, when you next go for a holiday."

The lawyer seemed to suspect some hidden significance in the words, for it was with a blanched cheek and trembling voice that he stammered out, "What mean you?"

"That you may be in debt, and may some day be obliged to fly—like a bird," replied Baudouin, smiling meaningly.

"You have heard some idle rumor affecting my credit, perhaps, Baudouin," replied Mr. Hargreaves, trying to look unconcerned. "May I ask from whom?"

"Walls, they have ears; and clerks, they have tongues; especially those clerks who are sent about their business in disgrace."

The lawyer allowed a groan to escape him.

"I have lately made the acquaintance of your late clerk, Mistair Jenkins, a clever man, but a little too fond of the drink," pursued the other; "and—"

"Enough! Look here, Baudouin; this matter must be arranged between us. You say you want to marry Mrs. Farrell," interrupted the lawyer, in a swift whisper.

"It is not so much the widow I want to marry as her money. You can buy me off—Jenkins has put me up to what he calls one 'wrinkle' or two."

"Hush!"

"If you should find it prudent to realize all the securities you hold, and—what you call it?—bolt."

"Be quiet, do, and come home to dinner with me," exclaimed the lawyer. "We can then talk things over quietly."

Baudouin assented, and half an hour later the pair left the city together.

CHAPTER IX.

TIDINGS OF JOY.

THE Earl of Verdon's town-house was at Kensington, and a few weeks after the day on which we left Alphonse Baudouin and Mr. Hargreaves, the lawyer, adjusting their differences, we find the young nobleman alone in his breakfast-room, busy with his thoughts.

They were evidently not inspired by the *Times* newspaper, which he held listlessly in his hands, and he suddenly threw the paper aside, and gave himself up unreservedly to his reflections. These, apparently, were not pleasant in their nature, for his brow was contracted, and his pale countenance had a troubled expression, betraying inward pain and perplexity.

The London residence of the Verdon's was an old-fashioned, plain brick dwelling, sufficiently modernized to be comfortable, both in external appearance and internal arrangements, but not up to the requirements of a tenant who desired to be on a level with the rather "fast" and showy style of the day.

Lord Verdon and his mother made, as they were wont to say, but "poor Londoners," and were never in the metropolis a day longer than the exigencies of the parliamentary session, or what they considered to be their social duties in relation to their political party, and their obligations thereto, rendered necessary.

The young Earl was thinking of Mary Farrell, and lamenting the gulf that lay between them.

For a few brief moments, when he had

wound his arm around her, and confessed his love—when her gentle nature and fair figure, so perfect in their union, had melted into his own heart at the moment when, despite her desire—springing from the worthiest motives—to conceal her passion, she had owned it and reciprocated his, on that bright autumn day in Verdon Park, they had seemed so near and dear to one another that nothing surely could separate them. Then came his interview with his mother in the evening, and the sickness of heart that followed it; and, as he recalled all to his mind, the Earl of Verdon felt sad.

Miss Wentworth had returned to her parents in Italy; her lover, Walter Cornish, accompanying her thither.

The return of the latter to England was now daily expected, and anxiously looked forward to by Lord Verdon. The young lord and the good-hearted young commoner were great friends, and the former envied the "smooth" progress of the the cotton-spinner's "course of true love."

Miss Wentworth and Walter Cornish sincerely sympathized with Lord Verdon in his disappointment.

Both had been made aware of his attachment to Mary Farrell. Lord Verdon had admitted the state of his feelings toward his cousin's happily-found nurse one day when indulging in a confidential chat with Adeline, and in the same breath confessed that there was an insurmountable bar to the realization of his hopes.

Miss Wentworth, as in duty bound, went and told her lover. The sympathies of her generous nature were strongly aroused. The more so when Lady Verdon informed her of the nature of the obstacle which stood in the way of her son's happiness.

Mary Farrell's behavior won her not only the love of her friends, but their respect.

She resolutely refused to yield to the temptation of keeping up any sort of intimacy with the Countess of Verdon; nor would she even see Adeline again.

The two girls, however, exchanged notes full of affection and nice feeling.

Lady Verdon would, of course, have been glad to see or receive Mary anywhere, or to act in any way she could as a true friend to her. She had had one painful interview with the poor girl, when she had spoken and felt like a mother toward her.

Lord Verdon would have seen her again; but she contrived to evade the interview, and the Countess greatly appreciated the firmness and good sense she displayed.

When Mary Farrell left Verdon Hall a blank was felt by its inmates; she was so much "missed."

Lord Verdon did not try to forget her. To drive her from his mind would indeed have been impossible; but he did his best to bear up against the disappointment he felt so keenly.

She had written to him one letter, in which she entreated him to forget what he had said to her—to let it pass from his mind as a dream.

The cogency of his mother's reasoning Lord Verdon could not dispute; but in his troubles, his lively, warm-hearted cousin Adeline was a great consolation, for she bade him hope.

Why, she knew not; but she had a belief in his future happiness.

The Earl of Verdon sat and mused in undisturbed reverie until his mother entered the room, dressed to go out.

He rose and kissed her affectionately.

"I am going to Leytonstone, Vance," she said. "There are many things in connection with the Home which need my personal supervision."

Lady Verdon's carriage was at the door. The institution to which she referred was known as "The Woman of Samaria Home," which owed its origin to her ladyship's benevolence, and was devoted to the relief of the struggling poor—those unprotected girls who, out of employment or out of health, equally experience the inconvenience, and too often the perils, of poverty.

The Countess of Verdon, never so happy as

when engaged in work of this kind, left her son, but promised to dine with him.

She had not been gone many moments when Lord Verdon's solitude was again broken—this time by the advent of Walter Cornish, returned from Italy, as expected.

"My dear Walter, I was thinking of you; but hardly expected you for a day or two yet."

"Then think no more of me, for the present, at all events," said the other, gayly, his appearance rendering superfluous Lord Verdon's instant inquiry as to his health.

"In the best of health, Vance, and with the best of news."

"Of whom, my dear fellow?"

"Of Mary—well, I won't say Farrell, because—because the name does not belong to her. She will have to change it. But only, I hope, till you have given her a better."

The Earl of Verdon looked eagerly into his friend's, the handsome, honest countenance that never reflected the will-o'-wisp light of ill-timed jesting, and then said, with quickened breath, "What is it about *her*?"

"It is this," replied the other. "I come back to England armed to the teeth with evidence—with proof that she whom we have known, and you, Vance, have learned to love, as Mary Farrell, should bear the name of Mary Wentworth; for she is, in sober truth, Adeline's sister."

Lord Verdon became pale for a moment, and then flushed with the excitement of hope as his friend, grasping his hand, said, in answer to his ejaculation of surprise, "Yes; sisters, Vance—the children of the same mother."

CHAPTER X.

SCHOOL-GIRLS' FOLLIES—MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCES AND SUSPECTED CRIME.

BUT he prefaced his story by an inquiry.

"What has become of that Frenchman, Baudouin? No longer enjoying your hospitality, I hope?" asked Walter Cornish, as he discussed the supplementary breakfast the Earl of Verdon had promptly ordered on his arrival.

"He completed the translations he undertook to do, and I must say to my entire satisfaction; and having no further need of his services, I not unwillingly parted with a man whom I was beginning to mistrust."

"Where is he to be found?" said the other quickly.

"I hardly know. He talked of returning to France, but I remember I gave him a note of introduction to Mrs. Farrell, who wrote and asked me to recommend her a French tutor for her daughter. But why will Alphonse Baudouin be wanted?" answered Lord Verdon.

"Because he is a villain, as no one knows better than the unhappy woman you name," rejoined Walter.

"But what has he to do with Mary?"

"He cast his dark shadow across the happiness of her mother's life when it was at its brightest, blighting, for a time, the sunshine that had, until then, been typical of her and her husband's love."

"You refer to Colonel Wentworth?" said Lord Verdon.

"I do," was the significant reply. "For a time this man was the cause of an estrangement between the father of Adeline and his wife, just as he caused a like breach between the late Mr. Farrell and his partner. But there was this difference: Mrs. Wentworth was wholly blameless; Mrs. Farrell, on the contrary, weak and yielding in her relations with Baudouin."

The Earl of Verdon's manner betrayed the most absorbed attention, and his companion proceeded:

"Adeline's mother and Mrs. Farrell, in their girlhood, went to the same school at Pimlico, where they were both taught French by the same master; but as Mrs. Wentworth had been placed there a year before Mrs. Farrell, she had, consequently, been under the tuition of Alphonse Baudouin some months longer than

the other, and, unfortunately, under his influence.

"Baudouin, at that time, was probably a by no means bad-looking fellow. He was young and plausible, and Mrs. Wentworth in her teens, thoughtless and inexperienced. The Frenchman took a base advantage of his position, and paid court to her; and she, in a flutter of innocent delight at the bare idea of having a lover, as school-girls have done before, and will continue to do to the end of time, gave him some encouragement.

"Alphonse Baudouin was nothing better than a cunning adventurer, his object money, to be extorted by the squeezing process now or at some future time.

"He contrived to get the artless girl to exchange a few letters with him while she was at home for the holidays, and she foolishly wrote to him as though she really felt love for him; though she knew that it was not love, nor even friendship, but only a passing fancy.

"At her age, love is so charming that a girl is apt to confound the delight she experiences in hearing it talked about with partiality for the person whose tongue lisps words of honey, but who, at heart, may be most completely false.

"When Aurora Awdry left school, Mrs. Farrell, it was arranged by her parents, was to stay on for another term.

"She was secretly pleased at the departure of Miss Awdry, for she had noticed with a jealous eye her flirtation with Monsieur Baudouin, and resolved to supplant her. It was playing a dangerous game, but she did not pause to think of that.

"It was no difficult task to make the tutor transfer his affections from Aurora Awdry to herself—a proceeding the scheming rascal had mentally determined upon. His cunning, however, taught him that it would not do to be too precipitate. He played his cards well, because slowly, and in the end with such success that he made a lasting impression on the flaxen-haired, weak, and insipid girl, who was just then budding into a certain doll-like style of beauty.

"She loved him; and he, seeing the genuineness of her passion, regarded it as a marketable commodity.

"He found out that her father was a merchant in the Minorities, vulgar but rich, and laid his net so skillfully that the girl was soon enmeshed; and Mrs. Farrell, unhappily, when she fell under the influence of the insinuating Frenchman, was worse than weak."

"What you are telling me about this woman agrees with what I had heard of her from my father, or, more correctly, *through* him; for it was by means of a written deposition, subscribed to by the late Mr. Farrell, and given by him to my father; that the latter became acquainted with the fact that there had at one time been unhappiness between his esteemed neighbor and friend and his wife. The perusal of that document also," concluded Lord Verdon, sadly, "caused me to despair of ever making Mary Farrell my wife."

"The quicker I proceed with my recital, Vance, the sooner will you feel justified, probably, in taking a more sanguine view on that point," said Walter Cornish. "To resume. You will not be surprised to hear that Adeline's mother, after her marriage with Colonel Wentworth, was importuned by Baudouin for money, solely on the strength of the foolish letters and a trifling present from her in his possession. Having been weak enough not to mention her acquaintance with Baudouin, it is not to be wondered at that she gave him money, or the next best thing, jewelry, on one or two occasions; but once, when, in quest of the sinews of war, he followed Mrs. Wentworth to Italy, Colonel Wentworth accidentally intercepted a package addressed to "Mons. Baudouin," in his wife's handwriting. His curiosity and jealousy were aroused. He went to his wife, and demanded an explanation, which she promptly gave, soon

convincing him of her innocence of anything worse than great indiscretion and weakness in having so long kept from him the story which she then revealed.

"Beyond a very slight temporary estrangement between Colonel Wentworth and his wife—there had been some hasty expressions on both sides—their happiness was not impaired. Baudouin disappeared, and their lives became once more unclouded, when, one day, the rascal turned up again, this time to receive a sound and richly deserved castigation at the hands of the colonel, who found him concealed in his garden. But the horsewhipping he received gave birth to a burning for revenge in the bosom of Alphonse Baudouin, and he took refuge in the island of Capri, there to bide his time.

"Six months passed. A child was born to Colonel Wentworth. Their first-born, a boy, you will remember, had died within a month of its birth; *this*, consequently, was their second, and a girl; their third being my dear Adeline. The second child, with whom we are now concerned, disappeared with its nurse, an Italian; but we now know that it was stolen by Baudouin, who, it appears, had vowed he would do some injury to Colonel Wentworth, that should prove as irreparable in the future as crushing in its present force."

"And how has all this come to light?" asked Lord Vernon.

"Through the confession of the nurse, who, as I have just said, was an Italian. Soon after the arrival of myself and Adeline at Naples, this woman was seemingly lying at the point of death. A priest had heard her confession, and, influenced by the exhortations of the holy man, she sent for Colonel Wentworth, and admitting the injury she had done him, at the instigation of Baudouin, expressed the deepest contrition and implored his forgiveness.

"A few hours later a favorable change occurred, and she rallied in a most remarkable manner. The improvement continued, and she is now, or will be very shortly, well enough to identify Baudouin should it be necessary.

"From what this woman has further said, it appears that he having with her connivance secured the infant—its cradle was found empty one morning under inexplicable circumstances, which cast no suspicion on any one particular person, though the nurse's manner and conduct at the time were not considered satisfactory—shortly after left for England in the company of a young English nursemaid, and the abducted daughter of Colonel Wentworth.

"The subsequent proceedings of Alphonse Baudouin are at present rather pointed to by suspicion than confirmed by certainty, but I believe we shall be able to prove that on reaching England he sought out Mrs. Farrell, and forced her to relieve him of the charge of the kidnapped child by passing it off as her own, circumstances favoring his plot.

"Those circumstances were that Mrs. Farrell had just given birth to a daughter, her husband being seriously ill at the time. That child died within a few weeks of its birth, and on the day of its decease the doctor who had attended Mrs. Farrell was himself seized with a fit of apoplexy, which terminated fatally an hour after his attack. It therefore became an easy task for Baudouin, assisted by the girl who had accompanied him to England, and further aided by the strange influence he appeared to exercise over Mrs. Farrell, to practice the deception he had induced the latter to assent to."

"But you did not hear all this from the Italian woman?" interrupted Lord Verdon.

"No, my dear Vance; but, with the warm sympathy and concurrence of Adeline and your mother, the Countess of Verdon, I caused other inquiries to be instituted in the neighborhood of the late Mr. Farrell's residence, and have so far brought them to a successful issue that very little doubt remains in our minds as to the truth of our belief that Mary Farrell is the daughter of Colonel Wentworth, and, consequently, Adeline's sis-

ter. There is an old dame named Puddefoot, who, there is reason to believe, will, as soon as we can trace her out, be able to give valuable evidence; though I trust more to the probability of our being successful in obtaining a full confession from Baudouin, and his weak-minded victim, Mrs. Farrell."

"Mr. Farrell, in the written statement I spoke of just now, declares his knowledge, through his wife's confession, of her guilt with some person whom he did not refer to by name," said Lord Verdon. "But why did you not inform me of what you were doing?"

"We thought it best to work unknown to you up to a certain point, because failure would only have increased your disappointment; whereas success, if achieved, would bring speedy and welcome relief," replied Walter Cornish.

"I must seek out Mary at once; not a moment must be lost!" said Lord Verdon.

"Perhaps you had better leave the affair in my hands until I have had an interview with Mrs. Farrell. Under the circumstances, I am disposed to think I shall be more successful with her than you would be."

"I believe you are right; and I will leave all to your tact, on which I rely."

Later in the day, Walter Cornish alighted from a hansom outside Mrs. Farrell's house—Lord Verdon had furnished him with her address—in the Camden Road.

He thought there must be some mistake, for the blinds were down at every window, and his knock remained unanswered. As he stood at the stuccoed portico, the conviction quickly stole upon him that the house was unoccupied. A postman and two or three tradesmen's boys passed in review before him, glancing curiously from him to the house, as if they could tell him something about the latter, but they went on their way quickly, for it was a cold winter's day.

Walter Cornish having waited some time, reluctantly descended the steps, feeling convinced that some unlooked-for obstacle was between him and the accomplishment of the purpose he had in view.

In the road he met a young man, who stopped at the gate and surveyed the exterior of the house.

They exchanged glances, for, strangers though they were, each guessed that the other was on the same errand as himself.

"There is no one at home, apparently," said Lord Verdon's friend. "Do you know this house and its inmates?"

"I do!" was the emphatic reply.

"You are acquainted with Mrs. Farrell, then?"

The other paused for a moment before replying, and looked in the face of his interlocutor. A moment's inspection seemed to satisfy him, and he said, "My name is Peter Puddefoot, and I am, or *was*, clerk to Mrs. Farrell's legal adviser and trustee of her late husband's estate. And you, sir?" he added, in a tone of respectful inquiry, for he felt that he was addressing a gentleman.

"To reciprocate your frankness, Mr. Puddefoot, my present visit to this neighborhood is due to the interest taken in one of the Miss Farrells by the Earl of Verdon."

"In which one?" demanded the other, shortly, his color rising.

"In Miss Mary Farrell," replied Mr. Cornish, with a slight smile and penetrating glance which rather added to Mr. Puddefoot's confusion. "I must ask you to accompany me to Lord Verdon's house, for we shall have a great deal to say to you, and it will probably be in your power to be of considerable assistance to us, for which, I may add, you will be well rewarded."

"The only reward I should value you would not be able to bestow upon me. Nevertheless, I will willingly accompany you," replied the young clerk.

Walter Cornish, favorably impressed by his companion's straightforward demeanor, hailed a cab; and as they were driven to Kensington,

Peter Puddefoot related all he knew of Mrs. Farrell's affairs.

It appeared that on going one morning to his employer's office, he found the non-arrival of Mr. Hargreaves at his usual time a matter of conjecture among his fellow-clerks.

Later in the day an ugly rumor, to the effect that the lawyer had "disappeared" under the pressure of pecuniary reverses, involving personal dishonor, filled him with dismay. Clients, suspecting "something wrong," called excitedly, demanding to see Mr. Hargreaves.

No satisfactory replies to their inquiries were forthcoming; and by five o'clock in the afternoon clients and clerks, alike cast down and apprehensive, began to speak boldly of their suspicions.

The next day came, and the next, but still nothing satisfactory transpired; and at the end of a week the office of Mr. Hargreaves was closed, and Peter Puddefoot, with a half-dozen others, found himself "out of a situation."

He subsequently ascertained that a few days after the financial collapse and mysterious disappearance of Mr. Hargreaves, Mrs. Farrell's establishment was suddenly broken up, and that she and her daughters, whether together or not was unknown, had disappeared with equal suddenness.

It was rumored among their neighbors in the Camden Road that the two girls, looking pale and sorrowful, had been seen to get into a cab; but whither they were going, and why, seemed destined to remain a complete mystery.

On the arrival of Walter Cornish and his companion at Lord Verdon's house, the latter was informed of all that had occurred, and a long discussion ensued as to what was best to be done.

Nothing, however, was determined on that night; but Peter Puddefoot promised to hold himself at the Earl of Verdon's disposal, and render him all the help he could in his endeavors to trace the missing girls, one of whom was the object of so tender an interest to himself.

The next day Walter Cornish was the first to read the account in the morning papers of a dreadful tragedy that had occurred at Dover.

The body of a gentleman, shot through the heart, had been found lying in a lonely field off the Folkestone Road, and, from letters found on his person, the deceased was supposed to be a Mr. Hargreaves, solicitor, of London, whose recent disappearance from the metropolis was significantly alluded to in the same paragraph.

CHAPTER XI.

MILLCENT IS RESCUED, BUT WHERE IS MARY?

A MONTH passed, and despite all the efforts made by the Earl of Verdon and his friends to discover the whereabouts of the lost girls, they were not to be found.

Peter Puddefoot was very hopeful and sanguine of eventual success. A great pedestrian, he knew every inch of London ground, and many were the expeditions he made north, south, east and west in the hope of finding a clew.

"Nothing venture, nothing win," was the maxim he acted upon, and his parents and aged grandmother, sympathizing with his secret attachment, of which, however, he made no secret, admired his pluck and determination.

"You deserve to succeed and win the girl you have set your mind on winning," said Dame Puddefoot to her grandson. "I cannot believe that the honest perseverance you are displaying will go unrewarded."

"I hope you will prove correct in your belief; but you are not always right, grandam. You were wrong about that rascally Frenchman, Baudouin, and thought he meant no violence; but I am convinced that he did. You say you told his wretched victim, the English nurse-girl who accompanied him from Italy, that you kept money in your cottage, and when he entered it that night he had not

forgotten the circumstance, you may depend. He meant robbery—perhaps worse."

"I begin to think that you are right, but I had you to protect me, my dear," returned the dame.

In the meantime, "The Dover Atrocity," as it was styled in the papers, remained a mystery, the general opinion being that a Frenchman, whose appearance corresponded with that of Baudouin, and who had suddenly disappeared from a lodging he occupied in the vicinity of the Priory Station, had had a hand in it.

Late one night, Peter Puddefoot, his face radiant with happiness, presented himself at the Earl of Verdon's residence, finding the young lord at home, and Walter Cornish with him.

That he had something satisfactory to communicate they could see at a glance, and he quickly unburdened himself.

It appeared that, chancing to pass through the Lambeth Walk on the afternoon of the previous day, he saw two young ladies leaving a baker's shop. There was something in their appearance that at once riveted his attention.

They were closely veiled, and the short February day was drawing in as they turned down a side-street, so that his inspection of them was not close enough to be conclusive; but the figure, the walk of one of them could only belong to Millicent Farrell, and none other.

He haunted the neighborhood for some time, making inquiries. He walked down the street into which the two girls had turned, looked up at the windows, his perseverance being at last rewarded by the sight of Millicent Farrell's face at one of them.

Precipitancy of action, he reflected, might spoil everything, and he determined to be cautious. Carefully noting the name of the street, and the number of the house, he hurried off to see Lord Verdon.

The satisfaction of the latter, as may be imagined, was unbounded, and the following morning, according to arrangement, Puddefoot again repaired to the region of Lambeth Walk.

"The young ladies are out," said the landlady of the house in which he had caught a glimpse of Millicent Farrell; "but if you will call again, at about five in the afternoon, you will most likely find them at home. They wouldn't like me sayin' this much, but I feel I ought to speak out. If they have any friends worth having, they ought to be informed of the girls' position. They're going to the East End this evenin' about a situation for one of 'em. If she don't get it, Heaven only knows what'll become of them!"

Mr. Puddefoot's heart beat wildly.

"Take this," he said, handing the woman, who was a favorable specimen of her class, a sovereign; "and," he added, in a hoarse whisper, "get them something."

The landlady nodded, and Mr. Puddefoot went away, to return later in the day.

Another disappointment was in store for him. The weather was so unfavorable—a dense fog seemed to be the probable climax to a wretchedly thick, damp day—that the objects of his quest had started on their expedition to the East End an hour earlier than they had intended.

"I could give you the address where they are gone," suggested the landlady.

"Do so, by all means! I can stand this suspense no longer. I must see one of them to-night; and—and" (he reflected a moment), "I'll do it, too!"

"The Limes, Leytonstone," that's the address they were a-going to find out," said the woman of the house, who had left him for a moment, to return with a printed card. "I do hope you'll manage to come across them. They're a-lookin' so ill and miserable-like, and more fit to be in bed than out such a day as this. Perhaps, like me, sir, you don't know much about the East End?"

Mr. Puddefoot took possession of the card,

but dignified no reply. To him Whitechapel was not less familiar than Woburnia—from Bayswater to Bow a distance that was as nothing to his long legs.

"At least a mile beyond the 'Swan,' Stratford; perhaps two," he thought, as he made his way to the nearest cab-stand, and hailed a hansom.

"As far east as you can go," were his instructions to the driver. "When you get to the 'Swan,' at Stratford, pull up, and I'll talk to you."

"Don't care about it," muttered the Jehu, shaking his head.

Mr. Puddefoot said nothing, but sauntered toward a large tavern close at hand, signifying, by a jerk of the head, to the cabman to follow.

He promptly called for two "goes" of "Irish, hot," and the cabman's expression became, if not more intellectual, decidedly more amiable.

When properly primed with the liquor of his choice, he suffered himself to be led, like a lamb, back to his vehicle.

Peter Puddefoot jumped inside, saying, as he did so, "Fancy fare; I'll make it all right! Drive off smart!"

The injunction to "drive off smart," was not easy to follow. The roads were slippery, slushy, and greasy; and, moreover, it generally happens that where a four-wheeled cab is concerned, either the pride of the driver, the condition of his horse, or the rustiness of his vehicle, one of these causes, or all combined, does not admit at starting of any higher rate of speed than a quivering crawl.

Blackfriars Bridge was crowded, in Fleet Street the state of the traffic was scarcely less congested, and by the time the Royal Exchange was reached, the anxious spirit of Mr. Puddefoot began to chafe impatiently at this slow rate of progress.

Further east, the fog was rapidly growing denser, and he peered eagerly out of the windows, first right, then left, as the cab pursued the not particularly "even tenor of its way."

"Shall have to get out and pad the hoof, that'll be the end of it," said Mr. Puddefoot to himself, as his driver threaded his way as skillfully as he could through Aldgate. "Phew! fairly up against something," he ejaculated, as the cab collided with a tram-car, causing a delay that was very irritating to Peter, who threw himself back in his seat, and tried to be patient, and to console himself by thinking of Millicent; skipping, in imagination, the present, and dwelling only on the possible future.

But what if, after all, she wouldn't look at him; proved too proud; or, worse still, loved another?

Mr. Puddefoot shivered. The contemplation of the last possibility was more chilling than the fog; so intensely disagreeable, that as soon as it presented itself to his mind he resolutely shook it off, and refused to entertain it.

He looked out on, and tried to interest himself in, the wide Whitechapel thoroughfare. There, traffic was almost at a standstill, and the noise, the wild shouts, the lurid glare of the crescent-formed globes that illuminated the fruiterers' shops as their light partially pierced the fog, or that proceeding from the gin-palaces of the neighborhood, by no means "few and far between;" the exhortations of a preacher haranguing from the portals of the headquarters of the Salvation Army, as he "announced the coming doom," on the one side, and the facetious discourse (delivered through a huge tin trumpet) of the showman inviting the public to avail themselves of the opportunity of seeing the talking fish, the Princess Amazulu, and the two purty prize Yorkshire lasses, on the other—all the sights and sounds that did "affright the air," which was strongly impregnated with the flavor of petroleum, were novel and bewildering even to the metropolitan mind of Mr. Peter Puddefoot.

A spirit of *diablerie* seemed to be imparted by the fog to what is in some respects the roughest district in all London.

Then the cab came to a standstill; this time voluntary, for the driver struck, and in emphatic language threatened himself with a severe visitation if he went a yard further.

Mr. Puddefoot, rather excited, seized the reins, and said, "Look here, cabby! If you don't jump up and try and spin along a little faster than this, I'll drive your lazy-limbed growler myself."

"Don't you see the vehicle's a got the rheumatics?—and 'tain't to be wondered at this weather. 'Spin along,' indeed! Look here, young man! we shall both find ourselves in the London 'Orspital afore this here fog clears off; and the long and short of it is, me and my hoss is both done up."

Mr. Puddefoot apparently thought otherwise, and knew his man and how to propitiate him; for, after a little renewed grumbling, the latter resumed, first his seat on the box and then the journey eastward, muttering to himself, "There's a gal at the bottom of this break-neck job, I'll swear, as there is at the bottom of most mischief."

After a long and tedious drive of another hour at least, Mr. Puddefoot reached his destination, to find himself landed outside the old-fashioned tavern known as the "Swan," at Stratford, in a dense fog.

He knew his whereabouts better than he could see it; nevertheless, he bravely pushed on on foot, making his way slowly through the fog in the direction of the Leytonstone Road, his progress being about as easily accomplished as that of a piece of string dragged through a glue-pot.

He just contrived to keep the pathway, and that was all.

The shops and inns soon became few and far between—the country was at hand.

Peter Puddefoot found no difficulty in ascertaining the situation of "The Limes," which was so far encouraging, that he walked on, despite the increasing density of the fog, quite cheerfully, giving the rein to his thoughts, which, under the influence of the pipe he was smoking, began to flow freely and agreeably.

He kept on the pathway, sufficiently near to hedge, wall, or garden gate, as the case might be, and walked steadily on.

From the directions given him, he supposed himself about ten minutes' walk from the house he sought; and, feeling that half his battle was over, gave himself up to the luxury of thinking of Millicent—day-dreaming under difficulties.

He was speedily recalled to a consciousness of the increased thickness of the fog by the discovery that he had evidently strayed out of the main road, and was where he knew not, but apparently away from anything tangible to the touch, save the ground beneath his feet, which appeared to be lumpy.

He walked on with uncertain tread, awed by the dreadful sensation of loneliness that came over him.

He stumbled over a clump of gorse, got on level ground again, and then one foot stepped into a pool of water, to be withdrawn just in time to prevent his pitching in headforemost.

Peter Puddefoot paused to collect his thoughts. Where was he? He must have wandered, in an unguarded moment, from the Leytonstone Road, and—Then the truth flashed upon him at once—he was on Wanstead Flats.

He knew enough of the locality to inform him that whether he got deeper into the Forest, or was fortunate enough to retrace his footsteps, would be almost a matter of chance. He turned sharp round, and trudged stoutly on, rather buoyed up by the belief that he could not have strayed far beyond the borders of the Flats, which must be fringed by at least a few houses.

He was right in his conjecture. The glimmering of a welcome light guided his steps in the right direction, and he soon had the satisfaction to find himself outside the gates of an old-fashioned country house. He was about to proceed along a path by the side of a high

brick garden wall, when the sound of a moaning voice caught his ear, and, coming upon a gas-lamp projecting from the wall, there was just light enough to reveal a female figure lying prostrate on the ground.

He bent over her. A short, spasmodic cry of pain escaped the momentarily parted lips. He raised her gently, and, under the gaslight, looked closely at her.

And as he stood there, bearing his light, fragile burden, and gazing upon her pallid features, his own figure became transfixed, petrified, as it were, by astonishment, as he recognized in the girl who lay unconscious in his arms—Millicent Farrell.

He walked on a few yards, bearing his precious burden, and fortunately came to a small general shop, where, in the back parlor, under the influence of warmth and the kind attention of the shop-woman, the poor girl revived slightly.

In an hour's time the fog had dispersed, and Peter succeeded in getting a cab; and late that night Miss Farrell was deposited in a snug, comfortable bed in the house of the Puddefoots, at Camberwell.

She was soon sufficiently recovered to be able to explain to Peter's mother—who was kindness itself—that she and Mary had set out in quest of the situation the latter was anxious to gain, and being totally unacquainted with the neighborhood, had lost themselves with fatal facility in the fog.

They had wandered about greatly alarmed for the space of half an hour or more, when suddenly Millicent missed her companion, who had been walking a yard or two behind her.

She shouted, but received no reply, retraced her steps, but unavailingly. No Mary was to be found.

She then resolved to try and find a house where she could procure assistance, but in doing so only got more hopelessly enveloped in the fog, and the more completely cut off, as it seemed, from sign or sound of human life.

Then she became weak and giddy, her step grew uncertain, her senses seemed to be going, her last recollection being of falling to the ground.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

A FORTNIGHT has elapsed since the rescue of Millicent Farrell by Peter Puddefoot on Wanstead Flats, and we are now about to return to the same locality.

A big brick mansion of the Queen Anne period, standing in a spacious garden, is known as "The Woman of Samaria Home,"—an institution in which, as already stated, the Countess of Verdon takes the keenest interest.

Watched with unwearied attention by her nurse, a young and beautiful girl is slowly but surely recovering from a severe attack of fever. She has permission to talk a little, and the first use she makes of the privilege is to express her gratitude for all the kindness of which she has been the recipient.

Then she asks, gently, "Tell me, nurse, how did I come here?"

"You were found ill—dying, it was feared—outside this house one night—one dreadful night; but although long exposure to the fog precipitated your illness, trials of another kind must have laid the foundation for it."

"Ah! I remember something—"

"You must remember nothing that will cause you pain. Think only with gratitude of your preservation—and I feel assured you are grateful—and that alone should bring you happiness."

"Nurse, one question—only one. Since I have been lying here has my mind wandered?"

The nurse averted her head, and seemed strangely affected. Her patient had only recently—within a few hours—recovered her mental balance.

"She does not answer!" the girl murmured. "Oh, Vance, Vance! if, in my delirium, thy name has been on my lips, it has been no sin,

surely, to repeat it—to think of—of—our love; but now that I am getting well, I must learn to—to forget—to know once more my duty!"

Her head sinks on the pillow, and the nurse rises quietly, and walks to the window.

"Nurse, nurse! come here. I want to talk—to confide in you. I have a secret."

The nurse, though hardly with the self-possession of a nurse, returns to the bedside, sits down, and takes her patient's wasted hand gently in her own.

"I know your secret."

"Ah! then you have heard me! But, nurse, promise me one thing—you will talk to me often, very often—every day—and help me to forget the man I love, but whom I can never marry?"

"Mary," replied the low, sweet, musical voice, "not so; I bid you hope—tell you to love him."

"You?"

"Yes, I—his mother—the Countess of Verdon!" bending over and kissing her patient affectionately.

Mary looked closely at her, and then it was that she, for the first time, recognized the features of Lord Verdon's mother, the noble woman who, chancing to be at the Home on the night of the fog when Mary was brought in, had at once recognized, and since nursed her night and day.

Never had the part of the good Samaritan been more perfectly rendered—never did rank pay more graceful homage to worth than when the Countess of Verdon paid the debt of gratitude she, with unfeigned sincerity, felt she owed the good girl who had nursed Adeline Wentworth in her illness at Verdon Park, by rendering her a like service.

The one look of deep, heartfelt gratitude Lord Verdon bestowed on his well-pleased mother, as he clasped her to his heart on the never-to-be-forgotten day on which she took "his bride" (how unselfishly she whispered the words in his ear!) to him, never faded from her memory.

Alphonse Baudouin, on his death-bed, in a low haunt in the neighborhood of Leicester Square, had confessed to the slaying of Mr. Hargreaves at Dover, whither they had gone, as planned, to divide the proceeds of the securities representing the property of Mrs. Farrell, with which the lawyer had absconded.

Their next step was to have been flight to the Continent; but, at the last moment, the lawyer had played his confederate false, and paid the penalty with his life.

Baudouin also made a full confession of the abduction of Colonel Wentworth's infant child, and of those criminal acts in connection therewith, which, admitted by him, established, with the confirmatory evidence already adduced, the fact that she whom we have known as Mary Farrell was the sister of Adeline Wentworth.

The joy with which the latter hailed the full confirmation of the discovery was only rivaled by that manifested by Colonel Wentworth and his wife, as they received another daughter to their home, and pressed her to their hearts.

The disappearance of Mrs. Farrell when the wretched woman had left her home, and those dependent upon her penniless, to fly with Alphonse Baudouin, involved painful details, into which, as they were never, after they once came to the knowledge of her friends, alluded to by them, we need not intrude.

It is enough to mention that she one day returned to the neighborhood of London, to all appearance a sincerely repentant woman.

Peter Puddefoot wooed and won Millicent Farrell, who soon learnt to love him and appreciate his sterling qualities.

"And you will promise and vow to make me really and truly as devoted a husband as you have proved yourself a lover?" said Millicent to Peter Puddefoot one morning when that young lady's health and spirits were both restored.

"Have I not said so?" cried the lover in return.

"You have; but in love a little repetition is sometimes acceptable," said Millicent, archly.

Mr. Puddefoot's speech failed him apparently, but he put his lips to what he considered to be their next best use, and gave her a kiss.

Of course Miss Farrell was offended, and equally of course quickly condoned the offense.

"And pray, sir, where do you propose we shall reside?" was the next question.

"I had thought of Camberwell," said Peter, apologetically, who had never in his wildest dreams of mundane felicity soared above that locality.

"In the preferable, the more aristocratic part, of course!"

"If there be one part of Camberwell more aristocratic than another you may depend upon my selecting it," responded Mr. Puddefoot, mildly. "Indeed," he continued, with growing eloquence, "I have already looked at a house in a new, and I think rather a stylish, neighborhood called Glendale Park. There is an oil shop at the end of the road, and the Greendale Arms at the other, a railway cutting you could jump into from your front garden, and—and four young plane trees planted along the pathway, Millicent."

Millicent turned her head to hide a smile; but there was no smile when a moment or two later she turned to her lover, and with moistening eyes said, "There is one thing Peter, I want you to promise me, and that is that you will never think or speak unkindly of my poor mamma."

"Never—honestly and truthfully—never!" was the earnestly spoken reply.

"Then I am convinced that you will be one of the best of husbands as I already think you one of the best of men," said Millicent, gratefully.

And he is proud in the possession of not only the prettiest, as he loyally believes, but, it may fairly be assumed, one of the best wives in all Camberwell.

Thanks to the Earl of Verdon, the worthy fellow has a first-rate appointment in the City, with the not remote prospect of a junior partnership.

The estate of the late Mr. Farrell drifted into Chancery, and Mrs. Farrell received from the court a sufficient income.

As a large portion of the missing securities were recovered, Millicent will eventually be rich in her own right.

The wedding of the Earl of Verdon to Mary Wentworth, and that of her sister to Walter Cornish, were celebrated on the same day, amid appropriate festivities.

"Let us seek the shade of the old beech-tree, dearest?" said Lord Verdon to his wife one day, in the spring alike of the year and their married life; and when they had reached the well-remembered spot, he continued, "There are many things I may win in this world, dear Mary—power, place, all the rewards that sometimes follow hard-earned, fairly-gained political distinction; but all these would be as nothing to the prize I have already won—a girl worth winning."

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